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師走トオル
タクティカル ジャッジメント SS4
Tactical Judgment
詐欺師の生まれた日
FUJIMI
MYSTERY
BUNKO

タクティカル
ジャッジメントSS
Tactical Judgment
詐欺師の生まれた日
4

それにしても――なんだな。
昔話なんてしてしまった
せいだろう、どうも気分が
センチメンタリズムに……
そう、あれは今日のような
曇りがちな日の
ことだった……。
って、いや、
晴れてたっけ？
まあ天気なんて
どうでもいいが――
もぞもぞ。

「来る日も来る日も雑巾掃除とハタキ掛け、
俺はこれでもれっきとした弁護士なんだぞ」
俺は、怒鳴りつけた

Tactical Judgment Vol SS4: The Day a Swindler Was Born

By Toru Shiwasu

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とある観光地に出かけた弁護士が、偶然にも知り合いの医者と出会った。
医者は訊ねた。
「珍しいな、ケチなおまえが旅行とは。一体どういう心変わりだ？」
弁護士は答えた。
「実は家が火事になっちまったもんだから、その保険金でな」
続けて弁護士は訊ねた。
「そういうおまえだって旅行なんて滅多にしないだろ。一体どうしたんだ？」
「俺たちのようなもんて。実は家が洪水で流されてしまって、その保険金でね」
すると弁護士は目を丸くして訊ねた。
「すごいな！　どうやって洪水を起こしたんだ？」

A lawyer, on vacation at a certain tourist spot, happened to run into a doctor he knew.

The doctor asked,

"Well, this is a surprise! A cheapskate like you on vacation? What brought on this change of heart?"

The lawyer replied,

"Well, actually, my house burned down, so I'm using the insurance money for this."

Then the lawyer asked,

"And what about you? You rarely go on trips either. What gives?"

"Something similar. Actually, my house got swept away in a flood, so I'm using the insurance money for this."

At this, the lawyer's eyes widened, and he asked,

"Wow, incredible! So, how did you manage to cause the flood?"

はじめてのさいばん
～ふぁんとむ・めなす～

My First Trial: The Phantom Menace

The middle school student who didn't look like a middle school student, Yamato Takeru, stood at the teacher's podium, which had been substituted for the judge's bench, and surveyed the classroom—no, the courtroom.

Normally, his demeanor was one of majestic authority, but this time, perhaps due to the large X-shaped bandage on his forehead, it lacked its usual sharpness. However, he paid no mind to this and solemnly spoke.

"Now then... Ms. Uribatake, are you ready?"

"Yes, of course."

The girl—known as Yoshiko Uribatake, the middle schooler with a brain development disorder—answered with an attitude far too arrogant for someone her age.

"Ms. Satsuki, are you ready?"

"Of course! Everything's prepared!"

I replied confidently, as the future star defense attorney. The judge's glasses gleamed as he nodded.

"Very well. Then, let the class trial begin."

◆

The class trial.

This event, which had become a tradition at our school, was being held once again, thanks to an incident that occurred three days ago.

The accused this time—the one responsible for causing trouble—was a boy named Shiro Itakura. He was a fellow student in our second-year Class B, the kind of troublemaker every school seems to have. His nickname was "Kozo Itazura" (Mischievous Brat). Any objections to this forced nickname were dismissed outright. Frankly, I couldn't care less what happened to this little troublemaker, and I certainly didn't want to defend him. But, as luck would have it, we were in the same class. And besides, a defense attorney doesn't always get to choose their clients, as I've learned from watching some shady lawyers. I suppose this is part of my training.

On the other hand, the victim's name was Kota Kuruma. He was a student from Class A, led by Uribatake, and for some reason, he had terrible luck with vehicles. As a baby, he was hit by a

motorcycle; in kindergarten, a regular car; and in elementary school, he was finally run over by a dump truck. Hearing all that, you might wonder how he's still alive. But it seems that being born under an unlucky star has made his body unusually strong, as he's never suffered serious injuries. In fact, when we assemble in front of the station for field trips, he's often used as a landmark because of his size.

Now, the incident itself was fairly simple.

It happened three days ago, after school. You might want to roll your eyes, but yes, Kota Kuruma had been hit by a bicycle. And yes, it happened on school grounds. Of course, this is the same Kota Kuruma who survived being hit by a dump truck, so there was no reason to expect that a mere bicycle would cause any serious injury. However, he wasn't entirely unscathed, and several students noticed him walking with a slight limp the next day.

At our school, students who live a certain distance from campus are allowed to commute by bicycle. However, there's a strict rule that they must wear a dorky helmet, and they're limited to riding the equally dorky, school-approved "mama bikes". These can be rented or purchased, but either way, the system is incredibly unpopular among students.

Still, students value their extra sleep in the morning, so a decent number of them use bicycles. As a result, the number of identical-looking bicycles left on school grounds is quite large, and it was impossible to figure out whose bicycle had hit Kota Kuruma.

However, under Uribatake's command, an investigation was conducted, and a suspect was found—someone who had stolen another person's bicycle and hit Kota Kuruma in a hit-and-run. That suspect was none other than this "Mischievous Brat", Shiro Itakura.

There were reasons why he became the prime suspect.

First, he had been seen near the scene.

Second, he had a prior record. His delinquent behavior was well-known, and he had previously been caught riding someone else's bicycle, tearing around the school grounds, and hitting someone. And guess what? The victim that time had also been Kota Kuruma. Talk about déjà vu.

Given this history, and the fact that Kota Kuruma was a member of our Class B's arch-enemy, Class A, it wasn't long before Uribatake, the leader of Class A, demanded that we hand over Shiro Itakura.

To be honest, none of us really cared if Shiro Itakura got lynched by students from another class. In fact, this was probably the consensus among all the second-year girls. After all, he was a habitual skirt-flipper. His pranks had affected nearly every girl in the school, myself included—though I'd rather forget about that particular incident.

If we were in elementary school, it might be more forgivable. But we're middle school girls now, blooming young ladies, and flipping our skirts is utterly unforgivable. In fact, Shiro Itakura should be thankful he's still alive after pulling such stunts. I suspect this is why Uribatake targeted him in the first place.

However, here's the thing: this time, Shiro Itakura claimed he didn't hit anyone with a bicycle.

Despite his record and his pranks, which were beyond any doubt, no one believed him at first. But he insisted, more strongly than usual, that he was innocent. This was rare because, while he liked to pull pranks, he was the type who'd usually confess if a teacher asked, "Who put the chalkboard eraser in the doorframe?" with an "Oops, you caught me!"

But this time, he was adamant about his innocence.

And, perhaps because my class was led by the kindhearted me, unlike the wickedly led Class A, there were many kind students in Class B as well. For example, Naoe Tamura. She had been accused of stealing someone's wallet once, and during the first class trial, I was able to clear her name. With that experience, she suggested that we shouldn't hand over Shiro Itakura, who was denying his guilt.

Then, the boys, particularly those in favor of standing up to Class A, began to express their support for this stance, saying, "Why should we comply with the demands of our enemy Class A so easily?" The argument quickly escalated toward a declaration of war.

Sure, Shiro Itakura had a bad reputation. But while he was certainly a prankster, he wasn't violent, nor did he smoke or do anything truly harmful. His pranks were limited to things like setting up chalkboard erasers at the door or playing around with school equipment—just mischievous kid stuff. Honestly, it was only the girls who really had a problem with him. The boys didn't seem to mind as much, probably because boys like pranks too.

And so, we in Class B decided that until our own investigation was completed, we would refuse to hand over Shiro Itakura to Class A.

But then...

Our investigation revealed some unexpected facts—facts that, depending on how you interpret them, could exonerate Shiro Itakura.

At this point, we could no longer simply comply with Class A's demands. Thus, Class A and Class B found themselves in conflict once again, with the hallway as our battlefield.

I suppose the fact that exams were approaching also played a role. People were probably just looking for an excuse to stir up trouble.

In any case, the hallway was especially noisy that day during lunch break. Spontaneous sumo and karaoke competitions broke out, students tried to steal each other's snacks, some started doing impressions of famous comedians for no reason, and with Valentine's Day approaching, others were making moves on girls from other classes.

And in the midst of this conflict, that guy appeared again—Yamato Takeru, with his odd name, who had always served as the judge whenever the class trials were held in the past.

With resounding, unwavering footsteps, characteristic of someone with firm conviction, he approached and—

"Is there a dispute here? A dispute, is there? This is unacceptable! First, tell me the situation! Do not be led astray by your emotions! Do not judge based on assumptions! To resolve a conflict, the first step is to explain the situation to a third party, to calmly and objectively assess—guah!?"

He collapsed.

As I said before, Class A and Class B were in a state of conflict at the time.

Yamato, without hesitation, had stepped into the heart of that conflict. As a result, he had unfortunately leaped right into the middle of Wakaba and Takada's sumo match, and—he was flung away. With a loud thud, his head slammed into the wall in the hallway. No, it was more of a crack.

…And so, the conflict silenced in an instant, and Yamato succeeded, albeit temporarily, in calming the situation. After he regained consciousness, as usual, he suggested holding a class trial instead of engaging in a pointless quarrel.

◆

"Now then, Ms. Uribatake, call your first witness."

"Understood, Your Honor."

And so, the trial began.

Uribatake looked toward the spectator seats and called out the name of a student.

"Then, for the prosecution's first witness, I call Kota Kuruma, the victim."

Following Uribatake's request, one of the parties involved in the incident, the large-framed boy born under an unlucky star, stood before the desk that served as the witness stand.

Though I had heard his injuries were just bruises, it was striking to see him limping, apparently in pain.

"Mr. Kuruma. Three days ago, you were involved in an unfortunate accident, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"What kind of accident was it?"

"I was hit by a bicycle being ridden by Shiro Itakura from Class B."

"Y-You're kidding! I didn't do that!"

My client suddenly shouted. The judge, noticing this, quickly flashed his glasses.

"Defendant. Be silent, you do not have permission to speak."

"Hey, let me handle this. Calm down."

I raised a hand to calm the still-agitated Itakura and stood up.

"Your Honor, I object. The current testimony has yet to be proven as fact! I request that it be stricken from the record!"

"Hmm, very well. Witness, limit your statements to the facts and refrain from expressing personal opinions."

"...Uh, sorry."

Satisfied with this, the Mischievous Brat reluctantly quieted down.

"Prosecution, please continue with your questioning."

"Understood. Now then, Mr. Kuruma. You were hit by a bicycle three days ago, correct? A bicycle ridden by someone, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then, could you please describe the situation in more detail?"

"Understood. That day, during the sixth period, we had soccer for P.E. After class ended, and homeroom was over, I was headed to my club activities, but then I remembered that I was the day monitor. As you know, it's the day monitor's job to clean up after P.E. So, I rushed back to

the field to gather up the soccer balls and took them to the soccer club's locker room. After that, I was on my way to the gym. I'm in the drama club, after all. But as I was passing behind the soccer club's locker room, on my way to the gym, suddenly, out of nowhere, a bicycle came flying at me from the side, and I was hit.

At first, I didn't know what had happened. I might've blacked out for a moment. When I came to, I was lying on my back, staring at the sky. You might know this, but I get hit by vehicles a lot. I'm kind of used to it by now. So, I figured, 'Oh, I've been hit again,' and when I looked around, I saw the bicycle speeding away."

"Who was riding the bicycle?"

"I don't remember clearly. But it looked like someone wearing a tracksuit, and it appeared to be Itakura."

"Again with this crap! You're making stuff up!"

Letting out a sigh, Uribatake addressed my client who had started shouting again.

"Defendant, you do not have permission to speak. Be quiet."

"Screw you! How am I supposed to stay quiet after hearing such blatant lies!? Just because you're wearing silk panties doesn't mean you can act all high and mighty!"

"Wha—?!"

The sudden revelation about the habitual skirt-flipper's knowledge caused the classroom to erupt into a storm of shock.

Uribatake's face flushed bright red. Whether it was out of anger or embarrassment, I couldn't tell.

But… hmm. So, Uribatake wears silk panties, huh? Quite formidable for a middle schooler…

At this point, the judge, who clearly disliked such uproar, glared at the defendant.

"I already warned you. I hereby sentence the defendant to contempt of court. As punishment, you will write five pages to apologize, understood?"

"What the hell!? That's so unfair! All I did was object!"

"Watch your mouth. If you continue to disobey, I will dismiss your appeal and immediately halt this trial. Is that clear?"

The judge’s glasses gleamed dangerously. I should mention that Yamato is surprisingly strong.

"Damn it, fine."

Perhaps aware of the judge’s strength, Shiro Itakura obediently backed down.

"Good. Prosecution, resume your questioning."

"Y-Yes, Your Honor."

Despite having such shocking information revealed in front of the public, Uribatake remained composed. I guess that deserves some respect.

"Let me rephrase my question. Why did you think the person riding the bicycle in the tracksuit was the defendant?"

"Well, first, during the sixth period, Itakura’s Class A had P.E. with us. So it wouldn’t be strange for him to be wearing a tracksuit. And secondly, I’ve been hit by a bicycle at school before, and the culprit that time was also Shiro Itakura. Later, Coach Undo from P.E. made him bow in apology, and he came to apologize to me, so I remember it well. The figure riding away on the bicycle this time looked just like Itakura."

"I see. So, what did you do after that?"

"At first, I thought maybe it was a hit-and-run. But with the culprit gone, there wasn’t much I could do except head to the nurse’s office. And that was the end of it; I just went home to rest that day."

"By the way, did you find out whose bicycle it was?"

"No, I don’t know. As you know, this school has plenty of identical bicycles."

"Earlier, when you walked to the witness stand, you were limping. What kind of injury did you sustain in this incident?"

"Well, there’s no bone damage or anything, but I ended up with a weird bruise, and it hurts whenever I walk. That’s why I’m walking funny."

"Lastly, one more thing. If the defendant is indeed the culprit, what kind of punishment would you want for him?"

"Objection! There’s no need to answer such a hypothetical question!"

"Sustained. Ms. Uribatake, that question is overruled."

"Very well then."

Uribatake pouted slightly.

"Let me rephrase. Mr. Kuruma, what do you want from the person responsible for this incident?"

"Well, I'm not asking for compensation or anything like that. I mean, it's not unusual for me to get hit by vehicles. But I do want the person to properly apologize for what they did. No lame excuses."

"Thank you. No further questions. Ms. Satsuki, your cross-examination, please."

I quietly stood up and began the cross-examination.

"Mr. Kuruma, you said that you might have lost consciousness, didn't you?"

"Uh, yes, I did say that."

"How long was it?"

"…Uh, about ten se—oh. No, if I was unconscious, there's no way I could know that, right?"

I smirked.

"Exactly, just as you said. You wouldn't know how long you were unconscious for. Isn't that right?"

"W-Well, that's true, but there's no way I was unconscious for, like, ten minutes or an hour."

"But it's entirely possible that you were unconscious for around a minute, right?"

"Well, I guess."

"Now, here's the issue. Let's say, hypothetically, that I hit you with my bicycle. If the impact caused you to lose consciousness, wouldn't ten seconds be more than enough for me to get away from your line of sight?"

"Y-Yes, that could be true…"

"Then, moving on. Right after the sixth period, when club activities were about to start, wouldn't it be normal for anyone to be wearing a tracksuit?"

"Y-Yes, that's true…"

"You said your consciousness was hazy, right? You only got a quick glimpse of someone riding away on a bicycle, so you couldn't possibly know exactly who it was, could you? Don't you think?"

"N-No, I saw him clearly."

"Well, of course, you'd say that. You also said you wanted the culprit to properly apologize, didn't you? That makes sense. You'd be angry if you were the victim of a hit-and-run. But maybe, in your frustration, you wanted to quickly pin the blame on someone, anyone, to get an apology and settle the matter, didn't you? You mentioned that you were hit by Mr. Itakura on a bicycle in the past, right? Isn't it entirely possible that you're still holding a grudge from that incident?"

"That's not true! I've never thought that!"

"Is that so? Then how about this conclusion: You were hit by a bicycle, and you lost consciousness. While you were unconscious, the person who hit you escaped. When you regained consciousness, you just happened to see someone in a tracksuit riding by on a bicycle. As I've said many times, you have a past experience of being hit by the defendant, Mr. Itakura, on a bicycle. So, you mistakenly assumed that, since Mr. Itakura was wearing a tracksuit, he must also be the culprit this time. Isn't that what happened?"

"N-No, that's not right! What evidence do you have to support such nonsense!? I saw it clearly, it was definitely Itakura!"

"How naive. That's the real nonsense."

I pointed my finger sharply.

"What evidence do you have, after being unconscious, to prove anything you saw?"

"Ugh…!? N-No, you're right, but…"

"In other words, your eyewitness testimony is only that reliable. Thank you, I have no further questions."

The spectators murmured in awe at my cross-examination, while Uribatake bit her lip. Well, for a first round, that wasn't bad.

"Now, Ms. Uribatake, if there's no redirect examination, call the next witness."

"Understood. The next witness is Rikao Yanagawa, who found the bicycle that hit the victim."

The boy who took the witness stand had a face that looked far too aged for a middle schooler.

I didn't know much about him since he was from a different class, but I had heard rumors. Rikao Yanagawa. He was the head of the science group. Well, technically, he was the president of the chemistry club, but for some reason, he gets angry when people call him the president of the chemistry club. So, everyone calls him the head of the science group.

"The day after the incident, at my request, you investigated whose bicycle hit the victim, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How did you conduct the investigation?"

"I took plaster casts of the tire marks left near the scene and compared the wear patterns with all the bicycles on campus at the time of the incident, identifying one."

…Are you really just a middle schooler?

But it's no use questioning that. It seems our school's science teacher, who also happens to be the chemistry club's advisor, has a particular talent—or hobby—for this kind of thing. In fact, on a previous field trip, he identified who had discarded a can of juice by fingerprinting it. For someone like Yanagawa, taking plaster casts of tire marks is probably child's play.

"So, what were the results? Whose bicycle was it that hit the victim?"

"To be precise, it wasn't anyone's personal bicycle. It was a bicycle under the management of the baseball club."

"I see. Thank you for your efforts. That will be all."

"Ms. Satsuki, do you have any cross-examination?"

In response to the judge's question, I lightly stood up and answered.

"No, nothing in particular."

There's nothing to challenge when all the witness did was state the facts.

"Very well. Ms. Uribatake, call the next witness."

"The next witness is Kita Asakura."

The next person to take the witness stand was a girl from Class C.

She was a cute, lively girl with a short haircut that suited her well. Of course, not as well as mine.

Few people at school didn't know of her. Not just because of her appearance, but also because she was the manager of the baseball team. Girls who take on such dedicated roles tend to be well-known.

However, no boys had their eyes on her. The reason was simple: she already had someone. The captain of the baseball team, Taro Yamada. His position was pitcher, and his nickname was "Tacchan". His name was remarkably unoriginal, but since we live in an era where an athlete with a bland name like Ichiro Suzuki hit 200 hits in the major leagues, people were expecting Taro Yamada to become a 20-game-winning pitcher. Frankly, no one seemed to be thinking clearly.

Incidentally, he had a twin brother. The captain of the soccer team, named Katsuro Yamada, and his nickname was "Kacchan". For different reasons (as in a certain famous baseball manga), people were worried if he might get hit by a car someday.

"Now then, Ms. Asakura. You're the manager of the baseball team, correct?"

"Yes, I am."

"Do you know anything about the bicycle involved in this incident?"

"Yes, I do. It's one of the bicycles managed by our team. It was donated a few generations ago by a former member who used to commute by bike, so we could use it for errands or accompany members on runs."

"That bicycle was stolen by Shiro Itakura from Class B, and he used it to hit the victim, correct?"

"Objection! I've said it before! That hasn't been proven yet!"

"Objection sustained. Ms. Uribatake, rephrase your question."

"Understood, Your Honor."

Honestly, she never learns.

"Let me rephrase. Ms. Asakura, it seems that your team's bicycle has been used without permission before, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has."

"Who was responsible that time?"

"It was Itakura. Apparently, he wanted to see if he could drift on two wheels with a school-issued bicycle."

"So, the defendant, Shiro Itakura, has a clear history of such behavior, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Thank you. Now, for the next question. Where were you three days ago, when the incident occurred?"

For some reason, Asakura hesitated slightly.

"Um, I was in the baseball team's locker room at the time. I was looking for the bicycle. But I couldn't find it where it was supposed to be, so I went out to search the area."

"Did you find the bicycle right away?"

"N-No, I didn't find it that day. But the next day, when I went to the locker room again, Itakura came out, acting like nothing had happened. When I looked inside the locker room, the bicycle was there, just like always."

"She's lying again…!"

Shiro Itakura muttered under his breath, only loud enough for me to hear.

"So, the bicycle that had gone missing three days before the incident was back in its rightful place the next day, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

Uribatake nodded in satisfaction and turned to face the judge.

"Your Honor, with that, the prosecution rests its case. I believe we have sufficiently demonstrated the nature of the defendant, how he endangered the victim, and the extent of the damage caused. I trust the jury now fully understands the circumstances and outcome of this case. I ask that the jury render a fair judgment and deliver justice to the defendant."

"The jury will make that decision after the defense presents its rebuttal. There's no need for you to make such a request at this stage. Anyway, if you're finished, we will now move on to the

defense's rebuttal. Ms. Satsuki, are you ready? Oh, but before that, do you have any cross-examination for this witness?"

"No, I have no questions for this witness. I'd rather get on with calling my own witnesses."

"Very well. Then we will now begin the defense's witness examination. Ms. Satsuki, who is your first witness?"

In this trial, I was well-prepared. I had thoroughly investigated the prosecution's witnesses and secured my own witnesses who could dismantle their testimony. So, I wasn't feeling like I was going to lose.

"First, I'll call Ms. Asahi Yomiuri as my witness!"

The witness who took the stand was a lively-looking girl with her hair tied up in a ponytail.

She's a member of the school's newspaper club, and her dream is to become a photographer for a major newspaper in the future.

"The morning after the incident, that is, the morning two days ago, where were you and what were you doing?"

"Uh, well, there's a photo submission section in this particular newspaper, and they have a category for school scenery photos taken by students. I was on the rooftop taking pictures for that."

"Specifically, what kind of picture were you trying to take?"

"I wanted to capture the quiet, empty school grounds in the morning. But, well, I'm not really a morning person, so getting to school before morning practice starts is tough for me. So, I was aiming to take a picture just before the start-of-school bell rang and the gates were about to close. That way, no one would be around, and I wouldn't be late either."

"So, you took a picture of the school grounds that were supposed to be empty, right?"

"Yes, but unfortunately, there were some students in the shot. I guess that's to be expected—there's always at least one or two students who are late every day."

"You brought an enlarged version of that photo today, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did. I had to forcefully blow it up and print it, so it's kind of blurry."

"Let me see it."

I accepted the rolled-up poster-like photo from Yomiuri. I held it up for everyone to see.

The classroom buzzed with murmurs.

Several students were visible in the photo. That was fine, but the issue was that one of the students was unusually large.

Due to the forced enlargement, the image was blurry, and you couldn't clearly make out any faces. However, there weren't many students with such a distinctive, large build that they could be easily spotted, even in front of the station.

Running full-speed with bread in his mouth, clearly about to be late—there was the figure of Kuruma.

"The person in this photo is clearly the victim, Mr. Kuruma, who was supposed to have an injured leg, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I have no further questions."

"I-I will begin my cross-examination!"

Uribatake hurriedly stood up.

"M-Ms. Yomiuri? That photo is very blurry. Yes, it does seem like there's a large person in it, but we can't conclusively say that the person in the photo is the victim, can we? Isn't that right?"

I slammed my hand on the desk with a bang.

"Hold on! There's no need to ask this witness that. Solving the prosecution's question is simple! The defense will now call the victim, Mr. Kota Kuruma, to the stand! No, he doesn't even need to come to the stand!"

I called out to Mr. Kuruma, who was seated in the gallery.

"Mr. Kuruma, let's cut to the chase. The person in this photo—it's you, isn't it?"

With everyone's eyes on him, Mr. Kuruma's gaze wandered around, unsure of how to respond.

"Please answer the question, even from where you're seated."

So came the judge’s final push, prompting him to squeeze out a reply, looking very apologetic.

"Uh, um… Well, I don’t really remember…"

Such half-hearted testimony could be fatal. I pretended to be shocked and asked again.

"You don’t remember!? But according to the attendance records, you were marked as late to homeroom two days ago, right? Yet, you were present for the first period. Isn’t that right? Or do you need the attendance records to jog your memory?"

"Oh. N-No, now that you mention it, that’s probably right."

"You said you didn’t remember, but doesn’t that at least suggest that Ms. Yomiuri’s testimony wasn’t wrong?"

"Well, I mean, that’s…"

"In other words, when you took the stand just now, you were limping as if in pain, but given that you’ve been hit by cars multiple times and come out fine, there’s no way you were seriously injured by being hit by a bicycle. So, that limp you were showing off was just an act, wasn’t it? You were probably told by Ms. Uribatake, or someone else, to make the defendant look bad, weren’t you?"

"I-I object, Your Honor! This trial is to determine whether the defendant hit the victim with a bicycle! These recent statements are completely irrelevant to the case at hand, and I demand they be stricken from the record!"

"That objection is off the mark! It was the prosecution that exaggerated the victim’s injuries to make the defendant look like a villain! I’m merely providing a rebuttal. Ms. Uribatake’s claim is nothing but a convenient excuse!"

"Objection overruled. The record will not be stricken."

"Ugh…!"

Uribatake bit her lip and backed down.

The prosecution had exposed a weakness. I pressed my advantage and appealed to the judge.

"Your Honor! Just refusing to strike the record isn’t enough. The prosecution had Mr. Kuruma provide false testimony to make the defendant look worse! This is contempt of court! I demand Ms. Uribatake be sentenced to three laps around the school grounds as punishment!"

"I’m afraid I must reject that request. The only one who can testify to the extent of the victim’s injuries is the victim himself. Whether the prosecution led him or not, the victim testified of his own free will about the extent of his injuries. Therefore, it cannot be said that the prosecution made him give false testimony. Even if there was some exaggeration, it doesn’t mean the victim lied."

Ugh, this judge is so rigid.

Well, no matter. I still have a trump card—a witness who will deal a fatal blow to the prosecution.

"The defense calls the next witness, Kosaku Zuga from Class D."

His name has the kanjis for "create" and "diagram" in it, and as you might guess…

"First, Mr. Zuga, which club are you part of?"

"The handicrafts club."

…he’s that kind of person. Apparently, he loves tinkering with things more than eating three meals a day, and he’s often called upon whenever something breaks on campus.

Despite his name and personality, he looks pretty ordinary, and everyone believes he'll probably end up as an average office worker, not an engineer or anything. Of course, his future title will be “Section Chief Kosaku Zuga.” Don’t say that’s lame.

"Now, Mr. Zuga. Where were you and what were you doing on the evening three days before the incident?"

"I was in the clubroom, doing club activities."

"At that time, you received a visit from a guest, didn’t you?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Uh… well, I don’t remember the name. I’m not good at remembering things like that. But I do remember what she looked like. It was her."

And the person Zuga pointed to was—

To everyone’s surprise, it was none other than Kita Asakura, the baseball team’s manager and the one responsible for managing the bicycle used in the incident.

Asakura herself flinched, likely startled by the sudden mention of her name.

"What was the reason for the baseball team’s manager to come and see you?"

"Well, she said she had broken a bicycle and wanted me to fix it."

At this, the classroom suddenly fell silent. And that silence quickly turned into murmurs.

Murmur, murmur Isn’t that strange? Didn’t Asakura just say that the bicycle was found the next day? So why would she have asked for repairs on the day of the incident…?

It was exactly as I had suspected.

"Mr. Zuga, what kind of damage had the bicycle sustained?"

"The cover over the front wheel was coming off, and the headlight was bent. It wasn’t a big deal, and since this is my hobby, I fixed it up nicely for her."

"Could it be that the damage was caused by the bike crashing into something?"

"I-I object! The question is leading!"

"Fine, I’ll withdraw the question."

Heh, objections like that are no big deal. I can just rephrase it, and it’s all good.

"Then, based on your experience in the handicrafts club, how do you think that damage occurred?"

"Well, just like you said earlier, it likely happened because the bike crashed head-on into something."

"Thank you. That’s all for this witness."

Heh heh heh.

With that, the tide has turned dramatically.

And soon, the truth will be revealed. Or perhaps, the people in the gallery already understand. Exactly what happened in this incident, and who caused it—

"Let me now call Kita Asakura as a witness for the defense."

I called the name of what would likely be the final witness.

Asakura, her face pale, nervously stepped up to the witness stand.

"Now, Ms. Asakura, can you tell us? Why did you act in a way that seemed like you were trying to hide the incident?"

"No, t-that wasn't my intention…"

"You'd better not try to make any excuses! I already know the truth. Isn't this how it really is? The person who hit Mr. Kuruma wasn't the defendant, it was you! And to cover it up, you asked Mr. Zuga from the handicrafts club to repair the bicycle and tried to destroy the evidence! Isn't that right!?"

"N-No! I didn't do anything like that!"

"Then why did you give such a bogus testimony, claiming you didn't know where the bike was on the day of the incident!? You just wanted to cover up the fact that you hit the victim, didn't you!?"

"I-I… that's…"

The witness hesitates.

Hesitation is proof she's hiding something. I was certain of my victory.

But then, at that moment—

"Ms. Asakura. Since the defense is pressing you so hard, it seems you'll have no choice but to tell the truth."

Speaking as though she already knew everything, Uribatake made a suggestive remark.

"Ms. Satsuki. I didn't expect you to investigate this far. But unfortunately, you couldn't uncover the truth behind the facts. That alone won't win you this trial."

"W-What do you mean!?"

"If you wish, I'll explain. I'd like the jury to think about this as well. Let's say, hypothetically, that the defense's claim is correct, and this witness is the one who hit the victim with the bicycle. But if that were the case, one thing wouldn't make sense."

"W-What is that…?"

Something that doesn't make sense? What does she mean? I have no idea.

"It's simple, Ms. Satsuki. It's the location. You see, the victim was hit near the soccer club's room, wasn't he? If the defendant had stolen the bike, that would be one thing. But if this witness was the one riding the bicycle, why would she, the baseball team's manager, have any reason to go near the soccer club's room? And just to state the obvious, soccer isn't part of the girls' PE curriculum yet, right?"

"Hold on, that's not strange at all! She's a manager for a sports team, isn't she? It's not that unusual for her to have some reason to go near the soccer club's room!"

"Yes, that's true, Ms. Satsuki. As a matter of fact, Ms. Asakura did have a reason to go to the soccer club's room that day."

"Heh, you've slipped up, Uribatake! So, it's entirely possible Ms. Asakura hit the victim on her way to the soccer club!"

But Uribatake didn't drop her smug demeanor.

"I'm afraid it's too soon to jump to that conclusion. It's true that she went to the soccer club's room that day. But once you know the reason, you'll see that she's innocent, and it will also explain why she secretly had the bicycle repaired."

W-What…!? Even though I'm sure she's exaggerating, the way she says it so confidently sends a chill down my spine.

Uribatake turned to the witness.

"Now, Ms. Asakura, it's come to this. Please, tell us. Why did you act so suspiciously on the day of the incident?"

"D-Do I really have to say…?"

"Yes. Otherwise, the overly suspicious defense attorney will make it seem like you're the culprit."

Asakura still hesitated.

But then, someone in the gallery suddenly stood up.

"Ms. Asakura. That's enough. I can't stand to see you get dragged into any more suspicion. Tell them everything!"

It was—the captain of the soccer team, Kacchan, or Katsuro Yamada.

Before I could even process what was going on, Asakura began to speak the truth.

"…Alright. I'll tell you everything. I… I went to the soccer club's room that day to see Kacchan!"

…Huh?

"W-What do you mean, Kita!? Why would you go to see him!?"

Shouting from the gallery, of course, was Asakura's actual boyfriend, Tacchan.

"I'm sorry, Tacchan! If my name were Asami Minami like in that baseball manga, I'm sure I would've never been drawn to the soccer club! But my name is Kita Asakura, "Kita" being "north" to "Minami" meaning "south"… I was destined to be with the soccer team captain, not the baseball team!"

"N-No way…!"

"Ms. Asakura, could you tell us exactly what happened?"

Uribatake, the only one still calm amidst the stunned classroom, urged her to continue.

"Alright… That day, after the sixth period ended, I waited for a time when everyone would still be busy with homeroom, and I went to meet Kacchan. Since I didn't want to waste a single minute, I hurried there on my bike. Just as you guessed, I met him in the soccer club's room, where no one else had arrived yet, and Kacchan and I were alone, and, um, kyah! What are you making me say!?"

"..."

The classroom fell silent. I mean, come on.

"T-That's fine, Ms. Asakura. What happened after that?"

"Oh, yes. I was about to leave the clubroom and return to the baseball team, but that's when I realized the bike I had ridden was gone. On top of that, Mr. Kuruma was lying on the ground nearby. I overheard the students who were helping him say that he had been hit by the bike I used to come to the soccer team's clubroom. That's when I got scared. I mean, wouldn't you? If

Tacchan found out that the bike only I was supposed to use had been found so close to the soccer team's clubroom…"

I somehow managed to slip away from the scene without being noticed. But there was one bit of luck. Afterward, I was fortunate enough to find the bike abandoned near the school gate."

"I see. But the bike had signs of having hit someone, didn't it?"

"Yes. The cover of the front wheel and the headlight were bent. If I had left it as it was, people would immediately know it was the bike that hit Mr. Kuruma. And if that happened, I'd be suspected of going to the soccer team's clubroom. So, I took the broken bike to the handicrafts club and had it repaired."

"So, someone used the bike you rode without your permission, hit the victim, and then abandoned the bike near the school gate. In other words, you had nothing to do with this incident, is that correct?"

"Y-Yes, that's right. I'm sorry, but the baseball team has a tournament coming up. At least until then, I wanted to keep this a secret from Tacchan... I-I'm sorry, Tacchan."

"Uwaaahhhhhhhhh!!"

With a sudden scream, Tacchan ran out of the classroom, likely in shock. I felt bad for him, but everyone was too stunned to move and stop him.

In the midst of it all, Uribatake gave me a triumphant look.

"That's all. Ms. Satsuki, if you have any further questions, go ahead."

"Mmm."

The atmosphere wasn't great. The impact of the latest testimony was too strong. Middle school students can live off gossip about other people's love lives for days. It felt like everyone had already forgotten what this trial was about. But I couldn't just give up now, or my reputation would be ruined.

"Well, let me ask you something, Ms. Asakura. I understand your excuse. But there's still something unnatural about all of this. First, you said this, didn't you? The bike you brought to the soccer team's clubroom was taken by someone, but then you just happened to find it near the school gate."

"Yes, I did say that."

"Do you have any witnesses who can confirm the bike was left near the school gate?"

"No, I don’t, but..."

"Don’t you think that’s too much of a coincidence? The area near the school gate is pretty visible to other students."

"Uh, well, even if you say that..."

"Doesn’t it make more sense to think of it this way? You rode the bike to the soccer club’s room, met with the captain, Kacchan, and when you were rushing back to the baseball team, you accidentally hit Mr. Kuruma. That seems a lot more natural, doesn’t it?"

"T-That’s not true! Really! I only went to see Kacchan!"

"No more questions!"

Mmm. This wasn’t good. That was all I had, no more cards up my sleeve… Perhaps sensing my unease—

"H-Hey, are you okay? You look really worried..."

The Mischievous Brat whispered to me, probably realizing that his situation was worsening. If it were anyone else, I might’ve offered some comforting words, but with him, it’s a different story.

"Well, you might as well brace yourself. After all, this mess is mostly because of your bad behavior."

"W-What’s that supposed to mean!? Sure, I’ve pulled a lot of pranks, but this time I really didn’t do anything!"

"Hmph, we’ll see about that."

"Come on, help me out here. If you clear my name, I won’t tell anyone about those Russia-flag print underwear you were wearing!"

—-Aqwsedrftgyhnfj!?

"W-Why do you know about that!?"

"Well, I’m a habitual skirt-flipper, after all. By the way, just a heads-up: those flag-print panties had an impact, but they lacked a bit of sex appeal. Maybe you should learn a thing or two from Uribatake—gyafgh!?"

Bam!

I smacked the defendant on the head, silently.

"Defense attorney, is something the matter?"

"Oh, no, it’s nothing, Your Honor. There was just a mosquito on my client’s head."

"I-I see. A mosquito at this time of year is unusual, but… well, alright."

Perhaps intimidated by my silent pressure to drop the subject, Yamato backed off without further comment.

◆

And so—the trial progressed to the closing arguments.

The final chance to persuade the jury.

The defense, that is, I, would go first. …But what should I do? That brat’s earlier comment had completely drained my motivation. Still, I couldn’t slack off and risk having my defense skills doubted…

There's no helping it. I reluctantly began my closing argument, seriously.

"Everyone. No matter how much the prosecution tries to cover it up, the truth of the incident is clear. Let me get straight to the point: The defendant, Mr. Shiro Itakura, is innocent. Yes, he’s not the one who hit the victim with the bicycle.

It’s true that Mr. Itakura’s behavior hasn’t been great. We all know that. In fact, it’s been terrible. If it were me, I’d never want to be friends with him. It’s also true that he’s been caught using other people’s bicycles without permission before, so it’s understandable that he was suspected in this case. But just because he’s a troublemaker doesn’t mean he’d harm someone. Think about it: the prosecution’s arguments are full of holes. The only person who claims to have seen Mr. Itakura hit the victim and flee the scene is Mr. Kuruma, the victim himself. But he admitted that he lost consciousness when he was hit by the bicycle. He testified that he wasn’t even sure how long he was unconscious. Can we really trust his testimony? And more importantly, the most suspicious person here is Ms. Asakura. She had the opportunity to commit the crime instead of Mr. Itakura. And she took the strange action of secretly having the bicycle repaired, which could be seen as an attempt to destroy evidence. I’m not saying she’s the culprit—that’s the prosecution’s job. But we can’t ignore the fact that someone with as much suspicion as her was left unchecked, while Mr. Itakura is being accused based on unreliable witness testimony and his bad reputation. Please, everyone, make a rational decision."

That should do it.

"Now, Ms. Uribatake, it’s your turn."

"Understood, Your Honor."

Uribatake stood up leisurely and addressed the jury sitting next to the judge.

"Everyone. You must not be deceived by the defense’s crude excuses. Let me be clear: The defendant, Mr. Shiro Itakura, took a bicycle that didn’t belong to him, hit the victim, Mr. Kuruma, and fled the scene. There’s no doubt about it.

It is true, as the defense says, that the only person who saw the defendant leaving the scene was the victim, Mr. Kuruma. That is a fact. However, everyone is well aware of Mr. Kuruma's warm and kind personality. At the very least, unlike the defendant, he would never pull pranks, let alone flip skirts. Besides, there’s no benefit for him in falsely accusing Mr. Itakura. The same can be said for Ms. Asakura, whom the defense is trying to paint as the culprit. She’s the manager of the sports clubs. That’s a highly demanding job that requires great dedication and selflessness. Everyone knows about her calm and gentle nature. And yet, she’s supposed to be the one who hit the victim? Ridiculous. It’s true that some of her actions may seem strange to an outsider. But as you all heard, there was a clear reason behind them. Think back to how difficult it was for her to explain those reasons out loud. Did she show any signs of lying? The truth about this case is clear: The defendant, who has a history of drifting around on someone else’s bike, thought he’d have some more fun with another bike. He found one lying around—and hit the victim. Whether or not the victim was seriously hurt is irrelevant. As a human being, the defendant must apologize for what he did. Members of the jury, I ask that you deliver the proper judgment.”

She sure can talk, and at length, too. Yet, everything she says is clear and logical. It’s becoming harder to tell which way this will go.

Well. Now all that’s left is to wait for the jury’s decision.

At that moment, I had a certain goal in mind. So, after the jury went into the adjacent room to deliberate, I secretly approached Uribatake.

◆

Half an hour after the closing arguments.

The jury, who had been deliberating in the next room, returned to the classroom.

“Foreman, have you reached a verdict?”

The judge spoke to the boy representing the jury.

“Yes, we have.”

“Please announce it.”

“We, the jury, have come to the following conclusion:

Our opinions were split down the middle. While the defendant seems more suspicious than anyone else, we didn’t feel there was enough evidence to convict him. However, we also couldn’t all agree to acquit him without any punishment. Therefore, we have decided on the following verdict:

The defendant must never flip skirts again.”

“Huh?”

Shiro Itakura let out a dumbfounded sound.

“If the defendant swears to keep this promise, we will consider the matter settled with a suspended sentence. That is our decision.”

“Very well. The jury’s verdict has been rendered. Defendant, do you swear? If you vow never to flip skirts again, you will not be held accountable for this incident.”

“What!? No way! What’s the fun of school life if I can’t flip skirts!? I can’t accept that verdict!”

“I see. If you cannot accept it, then there’s no choice. In that case, the defendant will be charged with assault. Assault is not a light crime—are you prepared for that?”

The judge glared at the defendant with a sharp gaze. Combined with the glint of his glasses, the effect was overwhelming.

This man always follows through on his words. The defendant, knowing this, quickly averted his eyes.

“Tch, fine. I’ll promise. That’s what you want, right?”

“Good. Then I hereby dismiss the jury and declare this court adjourned.”

And in that very moment—the classroom erupted with cheers from the girls.

In contrast, my client and a few of the boys were completely dejected. Hey, why are you guys so disappointed?

In any case, I was quite satisfied with the outcome.

When the jury went into deliberation after the closing arguments, I had secretly approached Uribatake. Frankly, this trial could have gone either way. While it did seem like Shiro Itakura was the culprit, there were just too many suspicious elements, like Ms. Asakura's strange behavior.

So, I proposed the following idea: It would be fine to declare the defendant guilty, but with a suspended sentence. The punishment would be something that took away the defendant's greatest joy—namely, flipping skirts. This way, I would maintain my reputation.

Considering there was a real possibility that Itakura could be acquitted, this wasn't such a bad deal for Uribatake either. After all, a suspended sentence still counts as a guilty verdict.

Thus, this plan, jointly proposed by both the prosecution and the defense, was accepted by the jury, leading to the verdict we just heard. In the end, the true culprit remained ambiguous, and Mr. Kuruma, the victim, ended up getting the short end of the stick. But even in his case, it's not like he suffered any serious injuries. In fact, I'm not even sure he ended up with a single bruise. Given that he complicated the case by pointing fingers at a culprit based on his fuzzy memory, I'd say it's a fair outcome.

Unlike some shady lawyers who would do anything to get an acquittal, real trials are often this ambiguous.

The only thing that leaves me a little disappointed—

—is that my record against Uribatake now stands at one win, one loss, and one draw.

(My First Trial: The Phantom Menace -- End)

はじめてのさいばん
～ねとげ編～

My First Trial: Online Game Edition

My name is Shinogi Kamatsuka. Having passed what is said to be the most difficult bar exam, I am currently in the middle of my legal apprenticeship, working toward becoming a lawyer.

As a budding lawyer who should ordinarily be busy studying law, for some reason, on that particular day—

I found myself sitting in an internet café, facing a computer. With Satsuki by my side.

"Uh, um, Satsuki? I made the character, but is this okay?"

When I asked, Satsuki, who was sitting in the seat next to me, leaned over and peeked at my monitor.

"Yeah, all you have to do now is click the OK button. But seriously, what's up with that 'Shinogi' for a character name? And a human female wizard, no less? So boring."

"I-Is that so? Sorry, this is my first time doing something like this…"

"Ugh, I've heard that line from you a hundred times already. Whatever, just hurry up and press OK."

"Y-Yes!"

Not fully understanding what was going on, I clicked on the game screen as instructed.

The monitor went black, and then—

A town reminiscent of medieval Europe appeared on the screen. And standing in the center was the character I had created, named "Shinogi."

The story goes back to the day before.

As usual, I was lamenting the injustices of the world while sweeping the floor.

That's when Satsuki came bursting in, fresh from school.

"Zenko! We've got a case! Come on, stop reading the newspaper and listen to me! This is your time to shine!"

Mr. Yamashika, looking extremely displeased, slammed the newspaper down on the desk and glared at Satsuki.

"Hey, quit being so loud! What is it this time? Let me guess, the lunch money's gone missing again, or someone found spit on their recorder, right? Don't bother me with that stuff! Go talk to Isshaku about it! Isshaku!"

"My name is Kamatsuka…"

"Doesn't matter. This time it's a case you'll love! It's a murder case, a murder!"

"What?"

A middle schooler had just blurted out something deeply unsettling.

It was no wonder Mr. Yamashika, who loves murder cases, twitched an eyebrow.

But it wasn't just him. I, too, was intrigued. A murder case. Ah, what a sweet, alluring sound. Maybe this time I'll finally get to see Mr. Yamashika handle an intense criminal trial…!

"Wait a second, you brat." But the teacher quickly looked suspicious. "I haven't heard anything about a murder case happening around here recently. Where in the world is this from?"

"It's from the online game I'm playing."

"..."

Without a word, the teacher resumed reading the newspaper.

"Hey, listen to me! My friend in the game is being accused of murder! Of course they're innocent! But to settle the matter, we're going to hold a trial, and I need some help. So, now that you understand, lend me your hand!"

"…This is so stupid I don't even know what to say. What kind of lawyer would stick their nose into a murder case in some game world? If you've got time to waste, go study or something."

"Ugh! What's that supposed to mean? Isn't a lawyer supposed to help the weak!?"

"To be precise, a lawyer helps those weak people who can pay. Anyway, there's no way I'm helping. But if you insist, why don't you borrow the errand girl over there and do whatever you want with her."

At that, both of their gazes turned toward me.

"Uh…? Even if you lend me her, she's just a rookie, you know…"

The girl, who's a good bit younger than me, made no effort to hide her displeasure.

"Well, I guess it can't be helped. Even if she's just a rookie, she did manage to be useful once before… Kamatsuka, you can type, right?"

"Uh, yes. I can type up reports, at least…"

"Good enough. Kamatsuka, tomorrow you're tagging along with me! Got it? That's an order!"

"Wait? What? Whaaaaaaat?"

Though I had a feeling this was coming—

As usual, I had no right to refuse.

There's something in this world called an MMORPG.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or simply, online games—shortened to net games. Basically, a bunch of people gather on a single game server and play together. I'd heard of their existence before, but I've never actually played one.

Apparently, Satsuki is really into one of these net games. It's called "Fantasy Ragnarok's Ambition Online 11: Bloodline of the Age of Exploration II." It's a fairly standard MMORPG set in a medieval European world, where swords and magic take center stage. Apparently, the blend of chaos and a beautifully rendered full-3D world is what makes it so popular, with a considerable number of users living their virtual lives in this world, fighting monsters and whatnot.

I don't quite get it, but that's the game currently running on the computer in front of me.

"So, uh, Satsuki? Could you please explain what's going on?"

"I told you, someone in my guild is being accused of PKing."

"Uh? Pee… kay?"

"Player Killer, or PK for short! It means killing another player in the game!"

…Apparently, in this game, it's possible to attack and even kill other players on any field outside of towns and villages.

"Wow, that sounds like a pretty violent game… What happens if you get killed?"

"It's not that big of a deal. You can be revived with resurrection magic, or even if you're not, you'll just respawn at the nearest town. But sometimes, you might drop your equipment, and someone could steal it. Plus, getting sent back to town in the middle of an adventure is a hassle, and more than anything, it's just irritating, right?"

"Y-Yeah, I can see that. It's like your avatar is getting killed, after all."

"But in reality, there aren't many people who go around PKing. Once you PK, your infamy stat shoots up, and you become a red name."

"R-Red name?"

"Yeah, short for a red-name player. See how your character's name, 'Shinogi,' is displayed above them? If you PK, that name turns red. That's why it's called a red name."

"I see, so it's kind of like being wanted."

"Exactly. And when you're a red-name player and someone kills you, you're pretty likely to drop your equipment or money. Equipment is super valuable, so most people are afraid of that penalty and don't PK. Well, some people do it just to blow off steam, though."

"I see. So, someone recently PKed another player?"

"That's right. The victim's name is 'Sue,' a female dwarf fighter. The incident happened, if I remember correctly, last Sunday. She was solo grinding when she looked away from the screen for a moment and got PKed."

"S-Solo grinding?"

"Ugh, it's a pain to explain everything. It means hunting monsters solo to earn money and experience points."

"Oh, so it's like grinding for levels in Dragon Quest 1!"

"Sorry, I don't know any games that old."

G-Generation gap…! It seems Dragon Quest 1 doesn't resonate with today's middle schoolers.

"And apparently, this character Sue was unlucky enough to drop her equipment when she was PKed and had it stolen."

"So, um, the charges are murder and theft—in other words, robbery-murder, and your friend is being accused of that?"

"Exactly. And to make matters worse, Sue happens to be a member of the guild ‘The Farmers’ Gathering.’"

"G-Guild…?"

"A guild is a community formed by like-minded players. In games like these, whether you’re fighting monsters or crafting items, it’s way more efficient to team up with two or three people rather than going it alone. So, most people join guilds. On top of that, some guilds wage wars against each other, and there are other exclusive activities that only guild members can enjoy."

"Oh, so it’s kind of like a lawyer’s association!"

"…Well, you're not entirely wrong. Anyway, back to the story—there’s this obnoxious elven woman named Foxy who leads the ‘Farmers’ Gathering’ guild. She’s incredibly stuck-up, always wearing skimpy clothes like some kind of pervert, and she and I just don’t get along at all."

"I see."

"You know how a parent can’t just sit back and do nothing when their child gets taken? Well, Foxy got really mad and started hunting for the culprit."

How on earth does this kid know such troublesome expressions?

"So, here's the thing—I'm running a guild called the 'Allied Cooperative Industries,' and guess what? The one being accused is one of my guild members, a guy named 'Lehneen.'"

"Leh... neen? Not Lenin?"

"The names look similar, so whatever."

"Uh, well… I see. So, Lehneen is denying the charges, right?"

"Exactly. I don’t think Lehneen is the type to PK, either. But the thing is, he was near the scene when it happened, and that’s a fact. So, of course, there’s been this huge argument about whether he did it or not. Eventually, we figured there was no point in just arguing, so we decided to hold a trial and settle it once and for all."

"…I see. I think I get the gist of it. But just one question—when you PK someone, your name turns red, right?"

"Yeah, that’s right. You become a red name."

"Then couldn’t we just look at Lehneen’s name now and see if it’s red or not? Wouldn’t that tell us if he PKed someone?"

"Oh, that won’t work. If someone kills you after you’ve PKed, your name goes back to normal. So, you can have a friend kill you to reset it. Of course, there’s a risk your friend might betray you, or you might get killed by someone else before you meet up with them, but it’s still an option."

"Ah, I see."

"So, you get the general idea, right? Now, I’ll come pick you up soon, so just play around and kill some time until I get there."

"Uh, okay."

So, I clumsily moved my mouse and tried walking around the nearly empty town. The 3D-rendered scenery was impressive, and I couldn’t help but think how amazing modern games have become.

But then, suddenly, a human male character equipped with a flashy sword approached me.

'> Hey there. Are you by any chance new? If you’d like, I can teach you a few things.'

A speech bubble appeared above his head. It was clear he was talking to me.

"Huh? Wha? Um, Satsuki?"

"Hm? What’s up?"

"Uh, some stranger just started talking to me. He’s asking if I want him to teach me stuff."

"Oh, that’s because you’re using a female character. There are always guys like that trying to hit on you, offering to ‘teach’ you things. Just tell him you’re waiting for someone. He’ll back off right away."

"O-Okay, got it."

I quickly typed on the keyboard.

'> Sorry, I’m waiting for a senior player right now.'

'> Oh, I see. That’s too bad. Well, maybe we’ll meet again sometime.'

Just as Satsuki predicted, the guy backed off without any fuss. I guess these kinds of encounters are what make online games so interesting, but I couldn't help but think that guys are the same no matter where they are…

Not even five minutes later, Satsuki showed up with two characters. Her character was a human female named 'Kurenai,' and her job was a Fighter. Not the most creative name, honestly.

'> Let me introduce you to Lehneen, the defendant.'

A speech bubble appeared above Kurenai's head.

'> Nice to meetcha. I'm Lehneen.'

'> Hello, nice to meet you.'

Lehneen, who spoke in an odd manner, appeared to be a Hobbit archer.

'> And this is Shadow. I've asked him to help with the investigation for the trial.'

'> Uh, right. Nice to meet you.'

'> Likewise.'

Shadow gave a curt reply.

He seemed to be an elf male, but he wore a black cloak and had an air of mystery about him.

"He… he seems like a difficult person, this Shadow guy."

"Well, yeah. But apparently, he's really good at digging into people's relationships and stuff, so he's super useful. Anyway, we're heading to the courthouse now, so make sure you keep up."

"O-Okay. I'll do my best."

◆

After that, I was taken to the courthouse. Well, not exactly a courthouse; apparently, there isn't one in the game, so we ended up in some kind of temple. It did have a somewhat courtroom-like atmosphere, but the random NPCs—'non-playable characters', I think they're called—just standing around made it a bit weird.

Where the priest would normally stand, there was a character acting as the judge. On either side of the judge were five jurors, who had been gathered as part of the tribunal. In the center of

the temple stood us, the defense, facing off against the plaintiff. By the entrance, other guild members and what seemed like random onlookers had gathered as spectators.

And somehow—before I knew it—the trial had begun.

'> Now, we shall begin the trial. Are both the prosecution and defense ready to proceed?'

A speech bubble appeared above the judge character, named 'Judge.'

Apparently, someone had gone to the trouble of creating a brand-new character named 'Judge' just for this event. I guess some people really have too much free time.

'> No objections to starting the trial!'

'> Likewise, we are fully prepared!'

Satsuki's character, 'Kurenai,' and the prosecution's lawyer, an elf wizard named 'Foxy,' both had speech bubbles pop up above their heads.

Foxy, true to form, was wearing a skimpy outfit—a mini-skirt, a belly-baring top, and sleeveless. Her figure was incredibly voluptuous, even for a game character. But for some reason, she seemed familiar, like I'd seen someone like her before.

'> Very well. Let the trial commence. Prosecution, call your first witness.'

At the judge's command, the prosecution lawyer Foxy stepped forward.

'> I'd like to call our first witness, the victim herself, the dwarf fighter Ms. Sue.'

"Pfft."

I couldn't help but snicker.

"A-A trial where the dead can testify? That's pretty amazing…"

"Well, it's a game. I told you, even if you die, you can just respawn in the nearest town."

"Uh, right. I see."

Soon, a small girl took her place at the witness stand—or rather, the witness area.

It was Sue, the dwarf fighter who was the victim in this case. I had imagined a dwarf fighter would look more like a middle-aged woman, but she was actually quite cute and looked like a young girl.

'> Now, before we begin, the witness must take the oath. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? If so, raise your right hand.'

'> Yup, I swear!'

At the judge’s request, Sue, the dwarf, cheerfully raised her right hand.

"T-This game is incredible. They even have an oath-taking motion?"

"Of course not. That’s just one of the greeting motions. If you type '/Hello' in the chat, your character will do that."

"Ah, I see."

So it’s just a greeting. No wonder she seemed way too enthusiastic.

'> Prosecution, you may begin questioning the witness.'

'> Understood. Now, Mr. Sue, where were you around 9 PM last Sunday?'

'> Uh, I was in the area west of Norbaleson, where lots of lizard-type enemies spawn. I was solo grinding while casually watching TV.'

"What’s Norbaleson?"

"It’s a place name. There’s a wide plain called that."

I see.

'> By the way, what were you watching on TV?'

'> I was watching this show called ‘The Law Consultation Office Where Sometimes Even a Line Forms,’ which airs every Sunday.'

I know that show well. Mr. Yamashika almost appeared on it once.

'> Oh, I watch that show too. So, what happened next?'

'> Well, anyway, I was solo grinding while watching TV, but the TV show got to a pretty interesting part, so I looked away from the computer for a bit and focused on the TV. But when I looked back at the computer after a few seconds—I was dead.'

Getting killed in the brief moment you looked away? That must have been a shock.

'> How long do you think you were looking away?'

'> Uh, it was from the point where they said the usual line, “What’s the opinion of our lawyers? Please give us your answer!” until the answer was revealed, so I don’t think it was more than twenty seconds at most.'

That over-the-top production in that scene does tend to last about twenty seconds. I remember being glued to the TV at that point too. I can understand why this victim got distracted for a moment.

'> So, after you realized you had been killed, what did you do?'

'> There wasn’t anyone around who could use resurrection magic, so I had no choice but to return to town. But after that, when I checked my inventory, I noticed my Opal Earrings were gone.'

'> So, you dropped them when you died?'

'> That’s the only thing I can think of.'

'> In other words, while you were solo grinding, you looked away from the monitor for a moment, someone killed you, and you lost a piece of equipment as a result?'

'> Yes, that’s right.'

'> Assuming you were PKed, how do you think you were killed?'

'> Probably by magic or an arrow.'

'> What makes you think that?'

'> At the time, I had my head turned to watch TV. I wasn’t really paying attention to the PC monitor, but close-range attacks have really flashy effects, and they make loud impact sounds. No matter how focused I was on the TV, if someone had been bashing me up close, I think I would’ve noticed. Magic or arrows can be fired from off-screen, so they’re harder to notice, and they deal a lot of damage in just a few hits.'

Then I turned to Satsuki, who was sitting next to me.

“Is that… true?”

“Yeah, she’s not wrong.”

“I see…”

This is such a complicated world.

'> I see. By the way, archery is one of the weapons that the defendant, a Hobbit, specializes in, correct?'

At that point, I quickly realized something and turned to Satsuki.

“Satsuki, that’s a leading question.”

“Oh, right.”

She started typing on the keyboard. Soon, a speech bubble appeared above Kurenai's head.

'> Objection! Leading the witness!'

'> Sustained. The objection is valid.'

'> Fine, I’ll withdraw the question. Now, one last question, Ms. Sue. What’s your relationship with the defendant, Mr. Lehneen?'

'> The guild I belong to, the ‘Farmers’ Gathering,’ has been at odds with Lehneen’s guild, the ‘Allied Cooperative Industries,’ for a long time. Just the other day, we had an argument about hunting spots.'

'> Thank you, no further questions.'

'> Very well. Defense, your cross-examination.'

'> Got it.'

"Alright, your turn. What should we do?"

"Huh? Wha—wait, you’re asking me all of a sudden?"

I mean, this is my first time even hearing about an online game trial. Still, when it comes to murder trials, there are certain basics.

"So, uh, there’s no dispute over the fact that the defendant and the plaintiff were on bad terms, right?"

"Yeah, that’s right. It’s common knowledge."

"Hmm, okay, then maybe we should ask if it’s possible that a third party was responsible. Like, if there were other PKers around. Also, don’t monsters sometimes attack in this game?"

"Good point. Yeah, that’s a possibility."

Satsuki started typing.

'> Ms. Sue, let me confirm. You’re claiming you were PKed by another player, correct?'

'> I can’t think of any other explanation.'

'> But there are monsters in this game that attack on their own, right? Isn’t it possible that while you weren’t looking at the monitor, a monster attacked and killed you?'

'> That’s possible, but my level and gear weren’t bad. I was solo grinding in a weak area, so even if those monsters hit me for twenty seconds, I wouldn’t die that easily. And like I said before, if I’d been hit up close, I would’ve noticed from the effects and the sounds.'

'> That’s all I wanted to ask.'

After Satsuki finished typing, she turned to me.

"That didn’t really help much, did it?"

"D-Don’t blame me… I-It’s fine. The trial's only just begun, right?"

"Hmph, I guess. Well, I didn’t expect it to go perfectly from the start. But what now? It’s not like we can overturn the fact that she was PKed."

"It’s okay, we still have options. Next, let’s ask how they reached the conclusion that the defendant is the culprit. We might find some flaw in their reasoning."

"Good idea. You’re actually more helpful than I expected."

"I-I’m honored…"

'> Next, I’d like to call the plaintiff’s second witness, Mr. Nerd☆'

The next person to take the stand was a dwarf named Nerd☆.

Putting a star in your name feels a bit embarrassing, but when it’s done by an old dwarf with a beard, it somehow doesn’t feel worth making fun of.

'> Mr. Nerd☆, you've known the defendant for a long time, haven't you?'

'> Yeah, I have. We're in different guilds, but dwarves and hobbits help each other out a lot when it comes to crafting.'

"…Is that true?"

"Well, yeah. Dwarves are good at crafting weapons, and hobbits are skilled at gathering the materials needed for weapon crafting, so it's only natural."

"I see, that makes sense."

'> Now, I don't have much to ask. Everyone, please take a look at the defendant.'

Foxy turned toward Lehneen, the hobbit who was sitting next to me in the game, and pointed at him.

'> As you can see, the defendant is currently equipped with a Sniping Longbow, correct?'

'> Yes, based on the graphics, that seems to be the case.'

'> You've known the defendant for a long time. How long has he been using that weapon?'

'> He's been using it for about a month. It's his best weapon, given his level and gear.'

'> Thank you, that's all I wanted to ask. Your cross-examination, if any.'

Foxy abruptly ended her questioning.

Satsuki turned to me.

"What do you think? Your turn."

"Hmm… at first glance, it doesn't seem like a very significant question. I think it's just a preliminary question for the next witness. At this point, there's no real reason for a cross-examination."

"Yeah, I agree."

In the game, Satsuki's character stepped forward and responded.

'> No cross-examination.'

'> Next, I'd like to call Dr. Takamatsu to the stand.'

The next person to take the stand was a human male wizard with glasses and a cloak.

'> Dr. Takamatsu, you run the website 'Dr. Takamatsu's Damage Theory,' correct?'

'> Yes, that's correct.'

What an odd name. I couldn't help but turn to Satsuki and ask her.

"Is this Takamatsu guy famous?"

"Who knows? I don't know him, but you should ask Shadow. We're in a party right now, so you can chat with him without anyone else seeing it."

"Okay."

I did as I was told and used the party chat to ask Shadow.

'> Um, Shadow, who's this Takamatsu guy?'

Since Shadow hadn't said a word since the trial began, I thought he might not be at his computer, but he responded right away.

'> He's a guy rumored to know more about the game than the people who made it. In games like this, the damage you take is determined by your attack and defense stats, but this Takamatsu guy figured out the exact damage formula on his own and published it on his website.'

'> W-Wow.'

I didn't really understand, but I could tell this guy was amazing.

While we were talking, the trial continued.

'> Now, first, could you confirm the defense and HP of the plaintiff, Ms. Sue?'

'> Sure.'>

With that, Takamatsu moved a little closer to Sue.

"…What's he doing?"

“He’s sending her a party invite. In this game, if you’re in a party, you can see the HP of your party members.”

“…I see.”

I still didn’t quite understand why he was doing that, but I figured it would become clear as the proceedings went on.

'> Got it. Her HP is 962. As for her defense, based on her equipment and class, I’d estimate it to be… 384.'

At least I understood that this Takamatsu guy really knew his stuff about the game.

'> Dr. Takamatsu, according to the plaintiff’s earlier testimony, she was looking away from her monitor for about twenty seconds. Considering that, could you tell us whether the defendant could have killed the victim in such a short amount of time?'

'> Yes, it’s possible. The defendant is equipped with the highest-grade weapon, the Sniping Longbow. Combining that with the Hobbit Archer skill, Strike Shot, and two normal attacks, I believe it would be more than enough to kill the victim. Hobbits are fast and specialize in high-damage attacks, so the defendant would have had plenty of time to kill the victim, pick up the dropped equipment, and flee.'

More unfamiliar terms.

“Uh, Satsuki, can I ask something?”

“Yeah, yeah. The Sniping Longbow is a really strong weapon, and Strike Shot is basically a kind of finishing move.”

“Oh, I see. So is it true that with that combination, the defendant could have killed the victim?”

“It’s not wrong, unfortunately.”

I finally got it. This Dr. Takamatsu guy had been called as a forensic expert in the game.

'> Thank you. No further questions.'

'> Very well. Defense, your cross-examination.'

"Alright, it’s your turn, Kamatsuka. What should we ask?"

"Well, even though a forensic expert has testified, our strategy doesn’t change. According to his theory, it’s possible the defendant killed the plaintiff, but that doesn’t mean it was impossible for

someone else to have done it. I'm not entirely sure, but there are other strong weapons and skills, right?"

"I see. So we should make him admit that other combinations could have killed the victim in twenty seconds?"

I nodded, and Satsuki moved her character forward with the mouse.

'> Dr. Takamatsu, may I ask something? You testified that with the defendant's level and equipment, it would be possible to kill the victim in under twenty seconds, correct?'

'> Yes.'

'> But that's assuming the defendant was the one who killed the victim, isn't it?'

'> …What do you mean?'

'> It's simple. I'm asking if there are other ways to kill the victim in under twenty seconds, with other combinations of weapons and skills.'

'> I wouldn't say it's impossible. As long as there's enough attack power to kill the victim within a certain time frame, it's feasible. However, the victim was quite experienced in the game, with a high level and decent equipment. To kill someone like that in just twenty seconds, with the limitation of long-range attacks… well, as far as I know, I can't think of any other combinations off the top of my head.'

'> Ugh.'

"Hey, Kamatsuka, this is backfiring! That didn't help at all!"

"W-Well, what can we do? This is how trials go."

"Ugh, damn it."

After grumbling like Teacher Yamashika, Satsuki typed on the keyboard and displayed, "No further questions."

'> The next witness is Mr. Crafty.'

Called to the witness stand was a male elf. Judging by his short sword and light armor, he appeared to be a thief.

'> Mr. Crafty, where were you and what were you doing around 9 PM last Sunday?'

'> Uh, I was doing the same thing as Sue, the victim. I was solo grinding lizards in the western Norvaleso area.'

'> Then, did you see the victim, Ms. Sue, who was also hunting in the same area?'

'> I don't remember clearly, but I'm sure I was in the area at that time. I probably passed by her at least once.'

'> Very well. Next, while you were hunting in that area, did you see the defendant, Mr. Lehneen, the subject of this trial?'

'> Yeah, I saw him briefly, but I'm sure it was him.'

'> Are you certain?'

'> I'm pretty sure. Lehneen's character had a red name. There aren't many PKers around, and his name is unique, so I still remember it.'

The audience started murmuring. I could hear things like, "Hey, isn't that decisive?" and "So he really was PKing."

…If this were a real courtroom, it wouldn't be so bad, but in a chat-based trial, the noise was incredibly distracting.

'> Silence! Spectators, refrain from chatting. You're disrupting the proceedings.'

The judge's warning finally quieted things down.

'> So you're certain it was Mr. Lehneen, the hobbit, with the red name?'

'> Yes, it was a hobbit.'

'> Thank you, I have no further questions. Cross-examination?'

In reality, Satsuki turned to me for advice. Knowing what to do, I explained.

"We need to dig deeper into whether this Crafty guy really saw the defendant."

"I get that, but how should I go about it?"

"Remember, the witness said he only saw the character ‘briefly,’ right? That’s the point to press. No matter how distinctive something is, if you only saw it for a moment, it’s not reliable as a strong piece of testimony."

"Good point. I’ll go with that."

'> Let me confirm a few things.'

Satsuki began her cross-examination.

'> Mr. Crafty, you testified that you only caught a brief glimpse of the character you think was the defendant, right?'

'> Yeah, that’s right.'

'> So how can you be so sure it was the defendant after just a brief look?'

'> Well, you know, red names are pretty memorable. They’re rare, and it’s a great chance to snag some valuable loot. Plus, the defendant’s name is really short—just seven characters. That’s why I remembered it.'

'> I see. But let me ask you something. You said it was a great chance to snag some valuable loot, so why didn’t you try to kill that red-named character right then and there?'

'> Uh, well, I was alone at the time. If I’d been in a party, I might’ve tried, but I was also a bit far away. Chasing him down would’ve been tough…'

Hearing that, I nudged Satsuki.

"See? He said something weird again. Ask him how far away he really was."

"Got it."

Satsuki quickly typed on the keyboard.

'> Hold on, Mr. Crafty. You just said you were far away, right?'

'> Huh? Uh, yeah, sort of.'

'> How far away were you?'

'> W-Well, I wasn’t that far. I could still read his name, after all.'

'> That’s not an answer. I’m asking you how far away you were.'

'> T-The distance was far enough that even a bow couldn’t reach. Chasing and attacking would’ve been impossible, don’t you think?'

'> That’s true. But if it was far enough that even a bow couldn’t reach, that’s quite a distance, right? Could you really identify the defendant so clearly from that far away, just passing by for a moment?'

'> Ugh…'

Wow, this girl is really something. I only gave her a bit of direction, and she managed to conduct such a thorough cross-examination. This must’ve really hit the mark… or so I thought.

'> N-No! I admit there was some distance, but the name was clearly displayed, so I remember it perfectly! It was the red-named character, Lehneen, without a doubt!'

Crafty’s character stubbornly replied, almost as if he was snapping back.

“Whoa, wait a sec, Kamatsuka! This guy’s starting to get mad! W-what do we do?”

“In situations like this, it’s best not to push back too hard. You should just deflect.”

I whispered the most suitable message to Satsuki. She quickly understood and typed it out on the keyboard.

'> Okay, okay, Mr. Crafty, I understand your claim. But when you passed by the character that seemed like the defendant, there was quite a bit of distance between you two, and you only glanced at him, right? That’s an undeniable fact, right?'

'> W-Well, yeah, that’s true.'

'> That’s all I wanted to ask.'

I think that worked fairly well.

After all, this is a trial in an online game, and eyewitness testimony is the best evidence we have. Since we managed to cast doubt on that best evidence, we should be in a much better position now.

…Or so I thought, until the next witness appeared.

'> Now, we’ll bring out the plaintiff's final witness. I call Mr. Sly to the stand.'

The person who came forward appeared to be a human male archer.

'> Mr. Sly, where were you and what were you doing last Sunday?'

'> I was hunting in the western part of Norvaleso, just like the victim, Sue. But unlike her, I wasn't solo. I was hunting in a party with a wizard friend.'

'> Did you meet the victim?'

'> Yes. I know her, so when we passed by each other, I greeted her.'

'> Please testify about what you saw then.'

'> I saw a red-named hobbit, Lehneen, running away.'

'> No further questions. Cross-examine if you wish.'

Foxy turned to us, sounding smug.

…Well, it's a chat, so it's not like I could really see her expression. But her confidence sent alarm bells ringing in my head.

Satsuki, unaware of all that, fearlessly began typing away.

'> Just one question. Mr. Sly, can you say for sure that what you saw was really the defendant?'

'> Absolutely. Unlike the previous witness, I saw the red-named character, Lehneen, up close. And I wasn't alone. If my testimony isn't enough, you can ask my party member, Gandalf the wizard, who's right over there.'

He turned around and pointed to one of the spectators, who did indeed have the name Gandalf.

Ugh, when he puts it that clearly, it's hard to refute. Eyewitness testimony is inherently difficult to disprove, especially in situations like this. There's not much we can do.

'> That's all I have.'

Satsuki bitterly tapped the keyboard.

The questioning of the plaintiff's final witness ended, and the trial took a brief recess.

We gathered for a strategy meeting with the guild leader of “Allied Cooperative Industries,” Satsuki, aka Kurenai, the defendant Lehneen, and the detective Shadow.

There was one thing I needed to confirm with Lehneen first.

'> Lehneen, do you know those two eyewitnesses? Have you met them before?'

'> No, not at all.'

'> I see. Then that’s suspicious. If you weren’t the PKer, then those two witnesses must be lying. But why would they frame you like that…?'

'> Oh, I get it. The simplest explanation would be that one of the witnesses was the real culprit, right?'

That’s the kind of thinking Teacher Yamashika always uses. Long live the pessimistic theory.

'> Exactly. Or, it’s possible one of the witnesses has a grudge against you, Lehneen, and lied to get revenge. But if you’ve never met them before, that seems unlikely. In that case, it’s more likely that the real PKer framed you, Lehneen, because you just happened to be nearby.'

'> I see. But if that’s true, what can we do? How can we prove that one of the two witnesses is the culprit?'

'> Well… yeah, that’s gonna be tough right now.'

It felt a bit strange to be chatting with Satsuki, even though we were sitting right next to each other.

At that point, Kurenai turned toward Shadow, who had been silent the whole time.

'> Hey, Shadow. Do you know anything about those witnesses, Crafty and Sly, who claim they saw Lehneen with a red name?'

'> Crafty, huh? He’s a pretty famous hardcore gamer. I heard his character’s already level 65.'

Unfamiliar with the term, I asked Satsuki.

“What’s a ‘hardcore gamer’?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. Someone who spends all day, from morning to night, playing online games and wasting their life away.”

“Oh, I see.”

What a term…

Shadow continued his explanation.

'> But his playstyle is pretty unusual. He doesn't join parties. He just spends his days hunting weaker enemies solo, farming experience and money.'

'> …Why? It's more efficient to join a party and hunt stronger enemies, right?'

That made sense, even to me. It would be absurdly difficult to solo a Metal Slime.

'> Who knows? It's probably just a personal preference. I mean, organizing a party and dividing up loot can be a hassle. But in his case, it seems like he's taken it to an extreme. Apparently, according to other players, he's been known to hunt solo almost 24 hours a day.'

'> …Whoa. Even for a hardcore gamer, that's overdoing it. He's going to die, like, in real life.'

'> Well, don't blame me for that. I mean, people are free to play however they want, right?'

'> Even so, it's odd… How could someone reach such a high level just by soloing without a party?'

'> …Is it really that difficult to level up?'

'> It's more than difficult. After level 50, it takes about 10 hours of solo grinding to level up once.'

'> T-Ten hours!? So being level 65 is beyond impressive…'

'> Yeah, he's a total hardcore gamer. Especially since he did it solo.'

"…Ah!"

At that moment, Satsuki suddenly raised her head.

"…That's it! The only way to reach that level solo is if he's doing *that*. But wait, if that's the case…

Kamatsuka, I think I've figured it out. I think I know why Crafty's character has been soloing endlessly and why he lied about seeing the defendant with a red name!"

"R-Really? If we can figure that out, this whole trial will go much more smoothly. What's the reason?"

“I can explain it, but I don’t think you’ll get it since you’re not familiar with online games. Besides, even if we explain Crafty’s testimony, it’s still not enough. There’s no explanation for Sly’s testimony that he saw Lehneen with a red name while he was hunting in a party.”

“Ah, that’s true. And his testimony seems even stronger…”

"Alright then, let’s start by asking Shadow about Sly."

In the game, Satsuki asked, ‘So, tell me about this Sly character.’

'> Sly? Looks like in real life, he’s just an ordinary student. He mainly plays on weekends or late at night during the week. Usually, he forms a party of about seven people and hunts together, just a regular player.'

How did he even get that kind of info? He really is like someone from the shadows.

'> Hmm, but at the time of the incident, he was in a two-person party, right? I wonder why that was?'

'> How should I know? He’s apparently been friends with Gandalf, the person he was paired with, for a long time. Maybe they were just in the mood for that. But Gandalf doesn’t have the best reputation. He’s got a history of PKing.'

'> I see.'

I wasn’t sure if this would be useful, but I nodded anyway.

'> Oh yeah, there’s one more interesting piece of info. Sly testified that he knew the victim, Sue, right?'

'> Yeah, now that you mention it.'

'> Turns out, they’re more than just acquaintances. They belong to different guilds, sure, but they often party up and are apparently pretty close.'

Hearing that, I couldn’t help but type furiously.

'> Kurenai, this could be useful. Maybe Sly was asked by Sue to give false testimony?'

'> It’s certainly interesting information, but… I’m not sure it’s enough to definitively clear Lehneen of suspicion.'

'> …Yeah, you’re right.'

'> Oh, that reminds me. There's one more piece of info about Sue.'

Once again, Shadow displayed a chat bubble.

'> Let's hear it. What is it?'

'> This is just a rumor, but… you know Sue, the victim? She's a female dwarf, right?'

'> Yeah, that's right.'

'> Well, apparently… she came out as a 'trap.''

'> Pfft.'

"Pfft."

Satsuki simultaneously burst out laughing in both real life and the game. She's a talented one.

"What's a 'trap'?"

"It's when a guy plays a female character. Basically, a guy pretending to be a girl online."

I see. So the character is a girl, but the person controlling it is a man.

That's pretty terrifying. So, the person screaming 'Eek, nooo!' in the game could actually be a guy.

At first glance, this doesn't seem to have anything to do with the case…

But right then, it felt like peanuts exploded in my head.

"Ah…"

The student player Sly, who testified that he saw Lehneen with a red name, and Sue, the victim, who came out as a 'trap.'

These two were close. When you piece all the information together, one clear hypothesis starts forming.

"Something wrong, Kamatsuka?"

"…Satsuki, I think I've figured out the truth behind this case."

◆

'> We will now begin the questioning of the defense's witnesses. Defense counsel, please call your first witness.'

'> Yes. For our first witness, we call Mr. Crafty.'

Responding to Satsuki's request, Crafty, the player rumored to be a hardcore gamer, was summoned.

'> Mr. Crafty, I've heard you prefer solo play. Is that right?'

'> I wouldn't say I prefer it. It's just that it's easy to do whenever I want, so yeah, I mostly play solo.'

'> By the way, what level are you right now?'

'> 65.'

The courtroom seemed to stir for a moment. It must be a pretty high level.

'> Isn't it really tough to reach level 65 through solo play?'

'> Well, I've put in a lot of time.'

'> That's right. You've certainly spent a lot of hours logged into the game. There are witnesses to that effect. But, Mr. Crafty… even though you were logged in, you weren't actually controlling your character, were you?'

'> …What are you implying?'

'> Let's get straight to the point. Mr. Crafty, you were using a bot, weren't you?'

This time, the courtroom buzzed even louder. The judge had to warn us to keep the chat under control.

"S-Satsuki, what's a 'bot'?"

"It's a program that automatically controls your character and hunts for you. Once you set it up, it keeps killing monsters without you having to do anything. You can rack up experience and gold endlessly, so there are some sneaky people who use it. But it's against the game's rules because it ruins the balance."

"W-Wow, I didn't know something like that existed!"

I see. If Crafty had been using something like that, then the credibility of his testimony about seeing Lehneen with a red name would be significantly weakened.

However—

'> That's absurd! I've never used anything that cowardly!'

Crafty immediately and firmly denied it.

Well, of course. Even if Crafty had been using a program that violated the game's rules, there's no way he'd admit to it.

But, thanks to her long experience with Teacher Yamashika, Satsuki wasn't going to let up.

'> Too bad, Mr. Crafty. I have a witness who can prove you were using a bot. Mr. Ehngells, it's your turn!'

A character stepped forward from the spectators.

'> Now, Mr. Crafty, surely you recognize this character, Mr. Ehngells?'

'> Uh? N-no, I don't remember.'

'> Don't remember!? That's impossible. Mr. Ehngells was killed by monsters a week ago in the west of Norvaleso. So, he begged the person nearby to revive him using chat, over and over again. But that person didn't respond at all—and just kept killing monsters in silence. That person… was you! Well, it makes sense you couldn't respond; you were using a bot at the time, after all.'

'> Ugh…'

"Satsuki, that's amazing! When did you manage to find all this out?!"

"What are you talking about? It's a bluff, of course. If he really was botting, he can't refute anything I say, so I can just go all out."

…She's so sharp.

'> So, Mr. Crafty, I bet Ms. Foxy, the guild leader of 'The Farmers' Gathering,' asked you something along these lines, didn't she? 'Since you were near the scene, you must have seen the red-named Lehneen,' right? You didn't want anyone to suspect you were botting, so you had no choice but to lie and say you saw it. Isn't that right?'

Then, it happened. Something unimaginable occurred. Probably realizing there was no way out—

'> Damn it, you'll regret this!'

Crafty's character suddenly disappeared. The courtroom erupted into chaos.

"S-Satsuki, what just happened…?!"

"Hmph, he showed his true colors. He force-quit the game and logged out."

I see. What a convenient world.

"Well, Crafty doesn't matter anymore. He ran away, which pretty much means he admitted everything."

"Y-You're right. Now we just have to deal with the other witness, Sly."

'> The defense calls Dr. Takamatsu as the next witness.'

As the courtroom finally settled down, Satsuki called the next witness, Dr. Takamatsu, a specialist in this game's forensic science.

'> Dr. Takamatsu, I'd like to confirm something. You testified that, given the victim's level and equipment, only someone with a high level and strong gear, like Lehneen, could have killed them within the 20-second window, correct?'

'> Yes, that's right.'

'> Well, here's the thing. You and I both made a ridiculously simple oversight.'

'> ...Huh? What are you talking about?'

'> It's simple. We were just assuming that the killer was acting alone.'

'> ...Huh?'

'> Think about it. What if the person who killed the victim wasn't acting alone, but there were multiple perpetrators? What would that mean?'

'> Aaaahhh! That’s right! It’s definitely a possibility. If there were multiple killers... even if there were seven of them, it wouldn’t matter what the victim’s level or equipment was—they could have been killed in an instant.'

'> So, if there were two killers, for example, the number of suspects who could have killed the victim within twenty seconds would suddenly increase, wouldn’t it?'

'> O-Of course.'

'> No further questions.'

So far, so good. Now, the real challenge is the next witness.

'> For the defense’s final witness, I call Mr. Sly to the stand!'

This is the biggest hurdle. After hearing Shadow’s story, I began to suspect that Sly might be the real culprit. I had figured out his motive.

However, there was one problem. There was no decisive evidence to prove that Sly was the killer. The outcome of this trial would depend on how much Satsuki could fill in that gap.

'> Mr. Sly, you’ve been watching the testimonies up until now, haven’t you? The other witness, Mr. Crafty, was using a bot, so his testimony that he saw the PK’er cannot be trusted. And now, thanks to Dr. Takamatsu’s new testimony, it’s clear that you, who were hunting in pairs, could have also committed the crime within twenty seconds.'

'> W-Wait a minute! What kind of accusation is that?! You’re making it sound like I’m the killer!'

'> It’s not just “like.” Mr. Sly, you are the one who killed Ms. Sue, aren’t you? You’re the real culprit!'

'> W-What?! What are you talking about?! That’s absurd! This is utter nonsense!'

'> I’m afraid it’s not nonsense. You admit you were near the crime scene, don’t you? And as you were hunting in pairs, you had the ability to kill the victim within twenty seconds. And most importantly, you lied and said that the innocent Mr. Lehneen was the culprit! Why did you lie like that? Because you’re the real killer!'

'> O-objection! The defendant is spouting delusions! This is nothing but baseless speculation!'

'> No, it’s not delusion. We’ve even figured out Mr. Sly’s motive for killing Ms. Sue!'

'> W-What...? Fine, then let’s hear it. What possible motive could I have?'

'> I’ll tell you. Mr. Sly, you were pretty close to Ms. Sue, weren’t you?'

'> ...What does that have to do with anything?'

'> You were only close to her because she was playing a female character, right?'

'> W-What nonsense! Even if that were true, it’s irrelevant!'

'> No, it’s very relevant. You recently found out that Ms. Sue came out as a ‘trap,’ didn’t you? Once you realized that Ms. Sue, whom you had thought was a girl, was actually a guy, you were enraged. So, you decided to PK her to get your revenge! Isn't that right!?'

'> O-Objection! This is nothing but the defendant’s delusion! Pure nonsense!'

'> Y-Yeah, that’s right! It’s a lie, nonsense! You’re twisting the story, but it still doesn’t prove that I’m the culprit, and it doesn’t prove that Mr. Lehneen is innocent either!'

'> You’re right. What you say is true. But this is enough to throw the entire trial into chaos.'

With that, Kurenai turned to face the judge.

'> Your Honor, and members of the jury. The situation is clear: the prosecution has no reasonable evidence to prove the defendant is the culprit! Therefore, we, the defense, propose that this trial be immediately dismissed!'

The courtroom erupted into chaos.

The guild members of the “Allied Cooperative Industries” shouted, “That’s right! Call off this farce of a trial!” while the members of the “Farmers’ Gathering” yelled, “This is a distraction! The trial must continue!”

'> Order! Order in the court! Defense counsel, you have not been granted permission to address the jury! Stand down!'

No matter how much the judge shouted, it was no use.

The courtroom was in complete disarray.

But then, in the middle of the uproar, someone slowly approached the witness stand where Sly was sitting.

'> Hey, Sly. Is what they’re saying true?'

It was Sue, the victim and plaintiff, who had previously called herself a ‘trap.’

'> ...Hmph, what difference does it make to you? In fact, I should be asking you the same thing. You pretended to be a girl and begged people for items, all the while you were actually a guy. You ‘trap.’'

No one could have predicted it at the time.

Sly’s words would soon lead the trial in an unexpected direction.

'> That’s... That’s a horrible thing to say, Crafty. No, Ikkun!'

'> !? W-Wait a minute! How do you know my real-life nickname!?'

'> Still don’t get it, Ikkun? It’s me, your childhood friend, Rie!'

'> W-What!? W-Wait, why are you here, Rie...!?'

'> You said you were really into this game, so I started playing too! I wanted to enjoy something you liked, together with you! But then...'

'> W-Wait a second! Then, Rie, why did you call yourself a ‘trap’!?'

'> Don’t you get it!? When you play as a female character, creepy male characters keep hitting on you! Just recently, I was even stalked by someone, so I had no choice but to say I was a ‘trap’!'

'> S-so that’s what happened...! I’m sorry, Rie. Without realizing that, I... I... killed you...! I’ve done something I can’t take back!'

'> Oh, Ikkun! But don’t worry, I was revived right away!'

'> R-Really...? Rie, can I come over to your place now? I want to apologize to you in person, as soon as possible.'

'> Yes, of course. I’ll be waiting for you!'

And then, just like that.

Both the real culprit and the victim disappeared from the game, likely having logged out.

The trial ended so suddenly that neither Satsuki nor I, nor anyone else in the courtroom, could do anything but stand there in stunned silence.

◆

"...So, what happened after that?"

Apparently somewhat curious, Teacher Yamashika asked, and Satsuki, on her way home from school, answered.

"Well, the real culprit and the victim both came to apologize to me for causing such a stir. So, for now, I guess you could say the case is closed."

It was an anticlimactic ending, but at least I had fulfilled my responsibilities, and that was a relief.

“Still, the world is a big place. I never imagined there’d be a world, or a trial, like that. Teacher Yamashika, who knows? Maybe in the future, handling trials in online games will become part of a lawyer’s job!”

"Yeah, that could totally happen!"

"No, it won’t!"

(My First Trial: Online Game Edition -- End)

詐欺師の生まれた日

The Day a Swindler Was Born

My name is Shinogi Kamatsuka.

I'm a lawyer-in-training, and currently, as a judicial apprentice, I'm frequently going to a certain law office to gain practical experience in legal work.

The name of the office is Yamashika Law Office. The name of the lawyer who runs it, and my mentor, is Zenko Yamashika.

...Well, honestly, he's not just a mentor. He's more like a bad example. Or maybe I should say a half-assed teacher?

Anyway, while it's true that this person exists, he has nothing to do with what I'm about to talk about, so just forget I mentioned him.

The other day, there was a TV drama called "The Trash Lawyer."

To put it bluntly, the protagonist is a lawyer named Garbage, so that's why the title is "Trash Lawyer."

Well, this Garbage guy does act like trash sometimes, but he's also portrayed as a lawyer with a deep sense of humanity.

However.

In the real world, it's not a joke—there are actually lawyers who could rightfully be called trash.

I won't say who.

But.

There are lawyers who take on criminal defense cases, where people's lives are at stake, purely for money or as a hobby—that's an undeniable fact. They are the trash of the trash, the King of Trash.

I won't say who.

Still, blaming everything on them personally might be a bit unreasonable, or even cruel. Lately, I've started to think that way. You see, there's a theory called the "innate goodness of human

nature.” The idea is that people are born (probably) good, and those who turn bad do so because of the environment they were raised in.

According to that theory, this particular teacher wasn’t trash from the day he became a lawyer. Rather, he must have experienced something that changed his outlook on life, which led him to become the kind of lawyer who’ll do anything to win, no matter what—“Hey hey ho, I’ll do whatever it takes!”

Even I, not too long ago, was determined to become a wonderful lawyer who would sacrifice my life for the weak. But recently, thanks to a certain teacher’s influence, I’ve started to think, “Isn’t life just about winners and losers? Wouldn’t it be better to be on the winning side?”

For example, this particular teacher, because of the hassle, doesn’t take on civil cases. He claims to specialize in criminal cases because they bring in money quickly, and he enjoys out-talking prosecutors as a hobby.

When you think about it, that’s a bit strange. In terms of out-talking your opponent, criminal trials and civil trials shouldn’t be that different. ...Well, I can understand why he doesn’t like civil trials, since they mostly consist of exchanging paperwork these days.

But even so, if he’s after money, it’s obvious that handling civil cases would be more lucrative than criminal cases. The number of civil cases brought in is higher than criminal ones, and if you win a large compensation, you could earn a hefty success fee. It’s a field where you can make as much money as your skills allow. It should be a perfect fit for him.

On the other hand, in Japan, it’s said that handling only criminal cases is a sure path to poverty. I know only one lawyer who specializes solely in criminal cases.

That being said, civil litigation is certainly a hassle and takes time. But if, like the teacher, you constantly win absurdly difficult not-guilty verdicts, then maybe you’ll never run out of wealthy clients saying, “I’ll pay you whatever it takes, just get me acquitted!”

But in any case, a normal lawyer wouldn’t abandon civil cases to focus solely on criminal cases. There must have been a reason. Some kind of turning point that made him abandon civil cases and focus solely on criminal law. Even if he’s trash, there’s no way he hasn’t handled at least one or two civil cases before.

This is just my intuition. No, it’s more than intuition. It’s an educated guess based on my close observation of that trash teacher. I suspect that teacher Yamashika—oh, I said his name. No, I mean, that certain trash teacher—must’ve taken on a civil case at some point and had a bad experience that led him to become a criminal specialist.

I just can’t shake that feeling.

...And that's what I was thinking as I wiped away my tears with a cleaning cloth.

"Teacher Yamashika, I've finished cleaning."

"Yeah, yeah. Well, you can go home now."

"Uuuuuuuuh…"

Here we go again.

But today, I couldn't just leave with a simple "Yes, sir."

It was already Friday. From Monday to yesterday, every single day, I'd been forced to do nothing but cleaning and running errands. My mental state had reached its limit. Well, as usual.

"Wait a minute, teacher! I've had enough! Please, at least once a week, let me do something useful that actually feels like legal training!"

As usual, teacher Yamashika clicked his tongue in obvious annoyance.

"This again? I figured it was about time for this. You're as stubborn as ever. Haven't I been making you do useful things for a lawyer every day? Cleaning is an important job for maintaining the office, you know. I'm where I am today because I did these kinds of mundane tasks."

Crack.

"I know that cleaning is important! I get that! But do you understand how I feel being made to clean every day for an entire week?! And let me ask you this: Can you really maintain an office just by cleaning? Can you eat just by cleaning? Can you win cases just by cleaning?

Do you understand how I've felt this whole week?! Day after day, waking up each morning just to spend the day wiping floors! Every morning, when I wake up in bed, the first thing I think is, 'Oh, today's another day of wiping floors.' Do you understand the sadness I feel, wondering if my whole life is just about wiping floors? Do you understand? Do you?!"

"Hey, Isshaku? Calm down a bit, will you?"

"Just listen to me! Yesterday, I went out drinking with my fellow apprentices! Everyone else is gaining all sorts of experience! Helping out in trials, sitting in on client consultations! Some of them even get treated to meals by their mentors! Treated to meals! Treated! To! Meals! I said it three times! Three times! Do you know how it feels to sit there, listening to them go on and on about these amazing experiences, and then get asked, 'What kind of things are you learning,

Kamatsuka?’ and being unable to give a decent answer? Do you know how blue that made me feel? Do you understand? Do. You. Under. Stand?!”

“W-Wait, hold on, Isshaku. Something’s off about you today.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from! And my name is Kamatsuka!”

“All right, all right. Calm down. I get it. I’ll talk. I don’t have any cases for you, but I’ll tell you something useful. So... so stop choking meeeee!”

“Huh?! I-I’m sorry, teacher! I got carried away! Oh no, what have I done?!”

I quickly bowed my head. If I didn’t sincerely apologize now, who knew what he’d do to me later.

Getting worked up is dangerous. To think I actually ended up choking the teacher. That really happens. I think I finally understood a little bit why murder cases never seem to disappear from the world.

“...Ah, cough, cough. Damn it, I feel like I just caught a glimpse of your true nature.”

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! But thank goodness, now I can finally do something that feels like real legal training today! A lawyer never goes back on their word, right? But don't worry, even if it were a lie, I would never file a complaint with the bar association! Never!"

I heard teacher Yamashika mutter something about raising me wrong.

While I didn't entirely agree with him, I figured it was probably my own fault.

"Ugh, fine. So, what do you want to ask about today?"

"Well, actually, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask for a while.

For example... could you tell me about the first civil case you handled after becoming a lawyer?"

Teacher Yamashika’s eyebrow twitched.

"...Hey, Isshaku. You know I specialize in criminal cases, right? So why would you want to hear about a civil case?"

"Well, the fact that you didn’t deny it outright means you’ve handled one before, right? A civil case, I mean."

"...You little brat. Your smart mouth’s gotten better, hasn’t it?"

"That just proves what a great teacher you are, teacher!"

He glared at me.

But I couldn’t always be scared, and if returning to a life of cleaning every day was the alternative, I decided to stand my ground and glare right back at him.

We locked eyes in silence for a while, but eventually, realizing how pointless it was, the teacher gave up.

"Hmph, so you’ve finally stopped backing down from just a glare, huh? Fine, I’ll tell you. But I won’t take responsibility if it leaves you in despair."

So there really was a civil case that led him to specialize in criminal law.

"That’s fine. Please, I’d love to hear it."

"Hmph. It’s a bit of a long story. Go make us some tea."

"Understood."

I didn’t mind making tea under these circumstances at all.

And so, as the teacher slowly sipped the green tea I brought him, he began to spin me a yarn.

...That’s not right. He started to con me with the story.

...No, that’s not right either. He began to *recount* the story. See? I’ve picked up weird habits.

"Now then. To tell this story, I first need to explain a bit about my mentor. ...Though, to be honest, I don’t even want to call him my mentor, but, well, for convenience's sake."

"Teacher, you had a mentor?!"

"Is that really something to be surprised about? A lawyer doesn’t become fully fledged on their own. Even I’m not arrogant enough to claim I’ve made it here all on my own."

"...No way."

"...Did you just say something?"

"N-No, no, no! I didn’t say anything! You’re imagining things!"

The teacher shot me a glare, and I frantically waved my hands.

Come to think of it, I do vaguely recall him saying that he got this office for almost nothing from someone else.

When I think about it, it's not impossible. Nowadays, teacher Yamashika is widely known, but not too long ago, he was just a run-of-the-mill rookie lawyer. The idea that he could set up his own office without any help doesn't exactly make sense, so it's only natural that he had a mentor.

However, when it comes to teacher Yamashika, there's something that makes it hard to believe he had a mentor. Namely, why didn't this mentor ever correct Yamashika's awful behavior as a lawyer?

If a decent lawyer had a disciple like Yamashika, they'd normally try to set him straight, right? Like telling him to take his cases more seriously, or advising him to be kinder to judicial apprentices. Maybe even to treat his juniors to a meal every once in a while, or at least *call them by their proper name*.

But I've never seen anyone reprimand teacher Yamashika. The only person who even comes to mind is Mr. Takeda, the vice-president of the local bar association, but given how much those two dislike each other, it's hard to imagine Takeda being his mentor.

Or maybe it's one of those "like father, like son" situations, and his mentor was also a terrible lawyer? That would explain why he never corrected Yamashika...

Or perhaps his mentor just doesn't know what Yamashika's become these days.

"Um, I don't mean to be rude, but... is your mentor still alive?"

"Yeah. He's old enough that he could kick the bucket any day now, but... unfortunately, I haven't heard any good news like that yet."

Not exactly what you'd expect a disciple to say. It's making my "like father, like son" theory seem more plausible.

"So, where does he live now?"

"He went to the U.S. for a job and never came back."

"He went to the U.S. for work...? I know the U.S. legal system is intense, but I can't imagine a Japanese lawyer getting any major cases there. Can you really call that 'work'?"

"Well, if you've got an American law license, sure. Do you know what they call lawyers over there? 'Ambulance chasers'."

"A... ambulance chaser?"

Would that be something like a "rescue vehicle chaser"? That makes no sense.

"What does that mean?"

"When a traffic accident happens in the U.S. and the victim is taken away in an ambulance, lawyers chase after it. They show up at the hospital and say to the victim, 'I'll negotiate with the other party's insurance company to make sure you get appropriate compensation. Of course, I won't take a single cent from you. Instead, I'll take 30% of whatever settlement you receive. This is a legitimate fee under the rules.' The victims don't mind if they don't get the full insurance payout, and the insurance companies, not wanting to make things complicated by dealing with lawyers, are forced to pay the full amount. That's how American lawyers, the 'ambulance chasers,' can take home tens of thousands of dollars in a single day's work."

Wow, America. I found myself feeling just a tiny bit jealous—not my fault, it's Yamashika's.

"...So your mentor went to America for that?"

"Yeah. America's a country of immigrants. Apparently, there's a decent demand for Asian lawyers among non-white clients."

I see, I get it now. His mentor really *was* just like him.

Still, that means his mentor had both Japanese and American legal qualifications. Maybe they're not that similar after all.

Well, I guess having a mentor like that explains why teacher Yamashika turned out this way.

"So, what's your mentor's name?"

"Yudai Gotokuji, basically like 'big hero in a grand virtue temple'. Ridiculous name for a lawyer, huh?"

Is the teacher really one to talk about names? And honestly, compared to teacher Yamashika's other acquaintances, a name like Yudai Gotokuji seems pretty normal.

"Anyway, when I first became a lawyer, I worked at the predecessor to this office, Gotokuji Law Office."

And the teacher began his tale.

A tale of a truly terrifying experience...

◆

Yudai Gotokuji is over seventy years old.

Describing him is easy. He’s a cantankerous old man. That one phrase sums him up perfectly. Oh, I forgot to add “bastard” to that.

He’s a stubborn, shameless, despicable old bastard with no sense of decency. Honestly, I think it’d be better for the world if he just died or retired already, but unfortunately, there’s no mandatory retirement age for lawyers, and it seems like only the worst people live the longest. So, it looks like he plans to stick around for a while. He’s a walking biohazard, and the sooner we build a landfill to bury him in, the better.

And as soon as I passed the bar, I started working at the Gotokuji Law Office, which was run by that Gotokuji.

"Enough of this crap, you old bastard!"

That day, I finally couldn’t hold it in any longer and yelled at Gotokuji.

But as usual, Gotokuji didn’t even look at me, just sat there reading his newspaper at his desk.

"Huh? What is it, Yamashit?"

"I keep telling you, my name’s Yamashika!!"

"Alright, alright, Yamashit. Anyway, it's not good to be so short-tempered. Are you low on calcium, or is it that time of the month?"

"Shut up, old man! For the past week, every single day, all I've done is wipe down the floors and dust! I'm a fully qualified lawyer! Where in the world is there a law office that makes its lawyers do nothing but clean?"

"Good grief. You youngsters these days are so picky. Listen here, maintaining the office is a legitimate part of a lawyer's work. I won’t tolerate any attitude that looks down on certain tasks."

"Shut up! I've had enough of your excuses! You could hire a cleaning service or a maid to handle the cleaning! Why does someone with a law degree have to do this crap? There’s work that only a lawyer can do, you know!"

"You idiot. A lawyer who’s supposed to respect the rights of others, and you say that? A lawyer doesn’t need to clean? Fool! It’s that sense of entitlement that leads to corrupt lawyers and politicians. Precisely because you’re a lawyer, you should be doing the basic tasks that everyone else does."

"Ugh... Why do you always have to come up with some logical-sounding excuse for everything?!"

"Shut your mouth. If you don’t like it, you can leave right now. Although, I doubt any other law office would hire a problem child like you. You should be grateful that you’re getting paid to be an associate lawyer."

"Damn it, you’re always taking advantage of me..."

As much as I hated it, I couldn’t argue against that point.

A lawyer without the capital or connections to start their own office has no choice but to be hired by another firm. That’s what they call a "hired gun" or, in legal industry slang, an "associate lawyer." It’s a notoriously uncomfortable position.

By the way, a lawyer as shitty as Gotokuji is called this. A "shit-lawyer." I just came up with it. It’s dirty, but it fits him well.

"Hmm. That said, it might indeed look bad on us with the bar association if we keep making a rookie do nothing but clean."

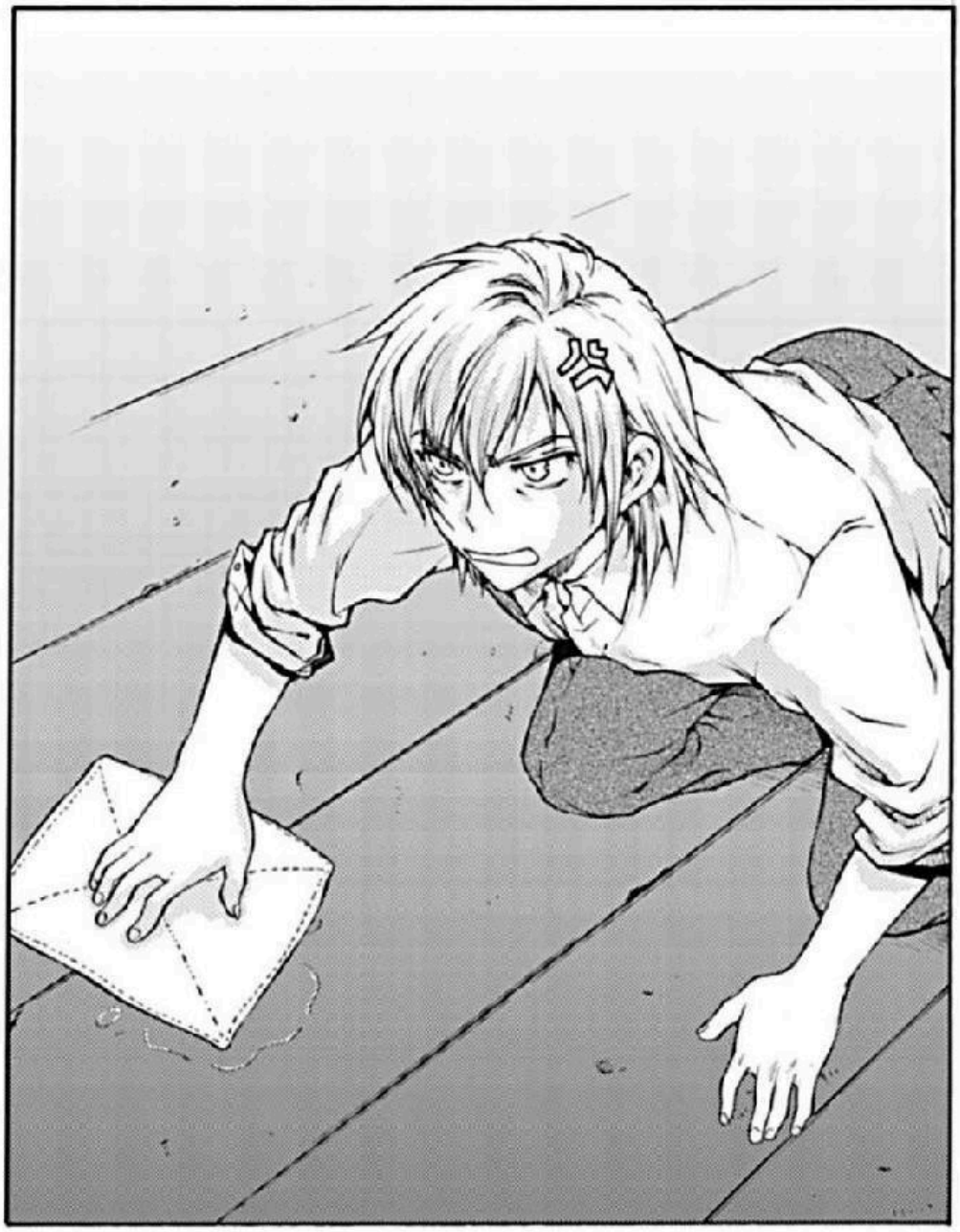
At last, Gotokuji lowered the newspaper he had been reading and took a stance that at least resembled being open to discussion.

"See? That’s what I’m saying, right? I mean, it’s not right to make a rookie do nothing but cleaning. I’d hate to report you to the bar association for power harassment."

"Hmm. Come to think of it, a week ago, I got a call from someone looking to hire us for a civil case. They’re supposed to come this afternoon, but unfortunately, I’ve already made plans to go out. Do you want to take this case?"

"I’ll do it! I’ll take it! Let me handle it! I don’t care what it is!"

At that point, I would’ve taken anything as long as it wasn’t cleaning. I agreed without even asking about the details of the case.



"Alright then. Fine, if you're that eager, give it a try. But remember, you volunteered for this. I won't tolerate any half-assed effort, no matter what kind of case it is. And don't you dare back out halfway through. You understand?"

"You don't even need to say it. No matter what the case is, I'll wrap it up in two days, tops."

"You've got a big mouth, kid. Well, do as you like."

The shit-lawyer smirked.

Then Gotokuji started getting ready to go out, but just before leaving, he seemed to remember something and said something odd.

"Oh yes. Before you officially take on this case, as your senior in the legal profession, let me teach you a magic spell."

"...What? A spell? You're not going to say something dumb like 'If you try, you can do it,' like some elementary school moral lesson, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Listen carefully, the spell is this: 'Go to hell.'"

"...Huh?"

"A lawyer's work is far more troublesome than you think. I won't even bother talking about how tedious all the paperwork is, but worse than that are the clients. They're terrifying. You know the saying 'truth is stranger than fiction'? Well, it's true. They'll come to you with the most absurd, ridiculous cases you can't even imagine. And since you're a lawyer, you'll have to handle all their requests with sincerity. No matter how idiotic those requests may be. Sometimes, you'll get so fed up with it all that you'll feel like you can't take it anymore. But you're not allowed to run away. You're a lawyer. So, when that happens, mutter this spell to yourself. 'Go to hell.' If you do that, you'll get so fed up that you'll be ready to take on anything."

With that parting advice, Gotokuji left. He doesn't need to come back.

In retrospect—

I should've realized something was off right away.

That phone call about a case from a week ago, the cleaning I'd been forced to do for the past week, and the old man's behavior, which seemed designed to piss me off.

And, most of all, the fact that the client was conveniently scheduled to come today. Despite knowing about the client a week ago, the old man still made plans to go out.

This old man, who never misses a trick, wouldn't make such a simple mistake.

That's right. From the moment I readily agreed to take the case, everything had been part of that shitty lawyer's plan.

But the sad thing is, after a week of nothing but wiping floors, I was too out of it to realize any of this.

And then, at 2 PM, the client arrived.

The guy was unusually young.

He looked to be in his early twenties. Compared to me, it's a bit unfortunate, but he had quite the handsome face. Not in a flashy host or boy band kind of way, but more like a young warrior—sharp eyes and a solid build.

However, there was one odd thing about him.

For some reason, he was holding a large paper bag, the kind you get at fast food places, and he was chomping down on what looked like French fries.

"Nice to meet you, I'm attorney Zenko Yamashika."

The first thing a lawyer must do when meeting a client—hand over your business card.

"Thank you. *Munch munch*. So, you're the lawyer who's going to take my case?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Uh, so... you're handling this all by yourself?"

"...Yes, I am. Is there a problem?"

For some reason, the guy suddenly looked a bit worried. What's this guy trying to say?

"Um, well, you seem really young... Are you sure you're up for this? *Munch munch*."

Crack.

'What the hell is with this condescending attitude? What, am I not good enough because I’m a young lawyer? If youth is the issue, you’re even younger than me, you punk. How dare this guy, shoveling fries into his mouth while talking to me, try to look down on me. You’d better write your will and get ready to face me!'

...I wanted to yell that at him, but I held back.

Calm down, calm down. I’m a lawyer, and this is client service. If I lose my temper over something like this, I won’t be able to do my job.

"P-Please don’t worry. I may look young, but I passed the famously difficult bar exam. At the very least, I assure you I have more than enough legal knowledge to call myself a lawyer."

"Ah, well, that’s true. Sorry about that. Here’s my card."

"Thank you. ...Huh?"

I took the card he offered and tilted my head in confusion.

"Mayakashi Village Promotion Committee Member", as for the name, uh...

...I can’t read this.

"Uh... so, how should I address you?"

"Oh, right, sorry about that. I get asked that a lot, so don’t worry. My name’s Nohei Hehehei. *Munch munch*."

"N... Noheihehehei?"

...His ancestors must’ve had some bad luck when they chose that name. Either that or they got duped by some shady fortune teller.

"Uh, I apologize if this is rude, but... where does your first name end and your last name begin?"

"Ah, I don’t know why, but people ask me that a lot. The last name is 'Hehehei'. *Munch munch.* But 'Hehehei' is kind of hard to say, right? So feel free to just call me Nohei. *Munch munch.*"

"Oh, uh, sure. Thanks."

So it’s not "Noheihe Hehei," it’s "Nohei Hehehei." Got it. What an idiot.

"So then... Mr. Nohei, what brings you here today?"

"Yes, well, first I need to explain a bit about the village where I live, Mayakashi Village. *Munch munch.* Although it’s located in the metropolitan area, the village has long been suffering from depopulation due to a lack of industry, tourism, and poor transport links. *Munch munch.*"

"Uh-huh."

"So, thirty years ago, in an effort to revitalize the village, the villagers came together to brainstorm ideas for a local specialty. Many of the villagers, including my father, started working on developing a signature food. But perhaps he pushed himself too hard—my father recently fell ill and is now bedridden. *Munch munch*.

But I’ve taken over his work and continued the development, and after thirty long years, we’ve finally succeeded in creating Mayakashi Village’s local specialty: the ultimate French fries, made from our prized 'Marquis Potatoes,' called 'The Original Mayakashi Fries'! *Munch munch munch munch munch*!"

"..."

'Mayakashi', as in 'deceptive'. That sounds like a name that’ll disappear before you even get to eat it.

And seriously, after thirty years, a father-and-son duo came up with French fries? I mean, maybe thirty years ago, that was revolutionary. But what could take thirty years to develop about fries?

"These are truly extraordinary fries! They’re not even in the same league as your run-of-the-mill fast food fries! *Munch munch*! Using our village’s Marquis Potatoes and a double-frying method, inspired by 'how to make the best fried chicken,' we fry them for two minutes and thirty seconds twice to create crispy-on-the-outside, fluffy-on-the-inside fries! Then, we sprinkle them with a mix of Hakata salt and Portuguese rock salt, in a ratio of 3.14 to 1, inspired by pi! This method brings out the true flavor of the Marquis Potatoes, resulting in the ultimate fries! Of course, we’ve already applied for a patent! *Munch munch*!"

That’s ridiculous. Fried chicken and pi have absolutely nothing to do with each other.

And can you even apply for a patent on something like that? Well, I guess if someone can seriously patent "a method for creating the universe," then maybe it’s not that hard.

But what’s the actual difference between Hakata salt and Portuguese rock salt? And can anyone really tell the difference with a 3.14 to 1 ratio?

"They say seeing is believing. Go ahead, try some."

Nohei handed me the paper bag he was holding.

As expected, it was full of French fries.

"Uh, alright, I’ll give it a try."

I suppose I have to eat them, considering the situation. I mean, they’re probably not poisoned or anything.

"...*Munch munch*."

To be blunt, they tasted like a mix between McDonald's fries and the japanese First Kitchen fries. Or maybe like a mix between the korean Lotteria fries and Wendy’s fries.

"Well? Amazing, aren’t they?"

"…Uh, yeah. I guess."

"Right? Right? I’ve been eating nothing but these twenty-four hours a day. *Munch munch*. With these, I don’t even need meals anymore."

Well, no wonder you’re not hungry.

"…Mr. Nohei, you mentioned your father fell ill. Could it possibly be due to excessive oil and salt intake?"

"Heh! You’re sharp! As expected of a lawyer!"

Go to hell, man.

"Uh, right. Anyway, I understand the background now. So, what exactly do you need me to do for you?"

"Ah, yes. I got so caught up in eating that I forgot to mention the most important part."

Nohei finally stopped eating fries and put down the paper bag. You should’ve done that from the start.

"Anyway, our family succeeded in developing a product that will become the face of our village, and we're ready to launch it on a large scale. But recently, some scoundrel in the neighborhood started selling knockoff fries using our exact cooking method! Her name is Ran Rararan, and she's an absolute menace!"

"..."

I have no comment.

"Um, by any chance, do you also have neighbors named 'Run Rururun' or 'Nohoi Hohohoi'?"

"Haha! What kind of joke is that? There's no one with such silly names, not in my neighborhood, and probably not anywhere in Japan."

Can I punch this guy? No, actually, I'd prefer if he punched me, so I can claim self-defense and hit him back.

"So, uh, how exactly did she copy… or rather, imitate your process?"

"Well, the biggest feature of the Original Mayakashi Fries is the mixture of Hakata salt and Portuguese rock salt in a 3.14 to 1 ratio. But Ran started copying that and selling her own fries under the ridiculous name 'The Authentic Mayakashi Fries—Beware of Imitations!' And no matter how many times I accuse her of stealing my method, she just plays dumb. She even has the nerve to accuse me of being the one copying her!"

"I see. So, to sum it up, there's someone selling fries using your special method, and you want me to stop them. Is that correct?"

"Yes, exactly! Please, I'm counting on you!"

By this point—

I was already starting to regret the promise I made to Gotokuji to see this case through.

And so, the next day. I ended up traveling all the way to Mayakashi Village, located deep in the mountains, and thanks to Nohei's guidance, I found myself in the middle of an unwanted direct confrontation with this woman named Ran Rararan.

"That's the house where Ran lives! *Munch munch*."

It was a souvenir shop in the village. The shop looked old and worn, but it seemed to be under renovation, probably in preparation for selling her version of the Mayakashi Fries.

And at that moment—

"Hey! You're Nohei, aren't you?! What are you doing here, you spy?! *Munch munch*!"

We had barely appeared in front of the shop when, as if bound by fate through French fries, the woman herself came out to meet us.

The woman, who bore the ridiculous name Ran Rararan, was stunningly beautiful, in stark contrast to her strange name.

She had beautiful hair and a well-proportioned face. To cut it short, if Nohei was a young warrior, this woman was the epitome of a japanese woman, Yamato Nadeshiko.

The only flaw, if I had to point one out, was her absurd name and the fact that she, too, was munching on fries nonstop. How do these two, Nohei included, eat so much of these greasy, starchy fries and not gain any weight? Maybe the Mayakashi Fries are some kind of miraculous invention after all.

"W-What did you say?! You're the real spy here! No, not a spy, you're a thief! You thief! You thieving woman! *Munch munch*!"

"Shut up! You're the one who stole my idea in the first place! You're the real thief here, you thieving man! *Munch munch*!"

"Who are you calling a thief?! You're the one who stole my idea of using pi to calculate the salt ratio!"

"What are you talking about?! I was the first to come up with that! And for your information, I don't use outdated formulas like 'pi equals 3.14'! The Ministry of Education's latest theory is that pi should be calculated as 'approximately 3,' and it's this vague ratio that creates the true Mayakashi Fries!"

Conclusion: They're both idiots.

"W-Why you...! You won't get away with that attitude for long! Do you know who this man beside me is? He's a lawyer! A lawyer, I tell you!"

"Hmph! So you couldn't win the argument, and now you're bringing in a lawyer? How cowardly!"

"Shut up! This is the rightful way to hammer justice into a shameless woman! Now, Mr. Yamashika! Show this woman the way to her downfall!"

Uh, don't just throw it to me like that—I'm not sure what you expect me to do here.

But at that moment, the woman suddenly started laughing.

"Hahaha! What's this, Nohei? How stupid can you be! What makes you think you're the only one who brought a lawyer!?"

"W-What did you say…!?"

"I've already consulted with my own lawyer too! Now, mister, if you please!"

Ran shouted as she glanced back towards the shop.

Then, from the back of the shop, a man appeared.

"Here I go."

Is he a bodyguard or something?

The man who slowly emerged was unmistakably a lawyer, wearing a broad-shouldered suit, a necktie, and a lawyer's badge.

However—he seemed to be some kind of half-foreigner, with slightly brownish hair, a tall nose, and a hint of blue in his eyes. Above all, his physique was far from typical for a Japanese person. He looked more like a pro-wrestler than a lawyer.

When he spotted me wearing my lawyer's badge, he lumbered over.

Even I felt a little intimidated by his overwhelming presence.

"Are you the lawyer representing Mr. Nohei?"

His tone was polite, but his imposing physique and sharp gaze added a strange kind of pressure.

"Y-Yeah, that's right."

As I answered, this lawyer moved his face closer, almost as if he was glaring at me, and I instinctively braced myself. Is this guy really a lawyer? Or is he planning to settle this with his fists instead of legal arguments?

But the words that came out of his mouth were completely different from what I expected.

"Well, it seems we can't have a proper conversation in front of our clients. How about we go to a café and talk?"

Looking back on it now, I probably should have declined.

After all, I had just been subjected to a conversation between two rather bizarre individuals, so a lawyer-to-lawyer discussion felt like a relief.

Sure, this guy didn't exactly look like a typical lawyer, but he had passed the bar exam just like I had. I had no reason to doubt that this time, we would have a rational and reasonable conversation. Who could blame me for believing that? No one, that's who.

The two of us entered the only café in the village.

"My apologies for the late introduction. Nice to meet you. My name is Vengo Shitaro, and I'm representing Ms. Rararan."

"...That's quite an unusual name you've got there."

"Yes, well, my father's Italian. But it's actually a pretty handy name for a lawyer. You see, Vengo Shitaro—sounds like 'Want me to represent you?' in Japanese. Haha!"

"…Oh, haha..."

I guess I'm supposed to laugh here.

"By the way, you're Mr. Yamashika, right? I've heard a lot about you. The youngest lawyer to join our bar association! It's really impressive, considering your age. My son's already twenty years old, and all he does is lock himself in his room, pulling the stuffing out of dolls while playing Spelunker all day. It's a real problem! Hahaha!"

"…Oh, haha..."

Am I supposed to laugh at this?

"Oops, we shouldn't be wasting time with small talk."

"Y-Yeah, you're right. Let's get to the point."

"But, honestly, what are we going to do about this case? To tell you the truth, I'm at a loss here. You probably already know the gist of it—whether or not they've patented the salt ratio. Well, our firm's finances aren't exactly great, so we had no choice but to take this case, but after looking into it, it seems both your client and mine filed for the patent on the same day. And let's

be real, there’s no way we can prove any patent infringement in this situation. I’ve already received the retainer, but honestly, I just want to quit."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. Honestly, I can’t deal with those two at all. There's something seriously off about them."

Thank goodness. As expected of a fellow lawyer, this Vengo guy seems to be the right man for the job. And no, I didn't mean just because of his name.

"Is that so? Mr. Yamashika, I’m glad you agree. I can’t stay silent any longer. Let me just say one thing. The salt ratio? The frying method? Who cares about that stuff! That’s not the important issue here! What’s the one thing those two should be focusing on most!? It’s not the salt or the way they fry the potatoes! The most important thing is—"

Vengo slammed his palm down on the table.

"Why the hell don’t they serve ketchup with the fries!?"

"...Huh?"

"Fries are best with ketchup. That’s the ultimate truth! Look, French fries are just blobs of starch, oil, and salt! If you keep eating them, your taste buds will go numb in no time! That’s where ketchup comes in! The slight tang and sweetness of ketchup made from Italian tomatoes smooths out the salty taste of the potatoes, making it so you can eat as much as you want! Plus, you can even do a little trick where you dip the end of the fry in ketchup and say, 'Look, it’s a match!'"

"..."

"And yet, both my client and yours are obsessed with the salt ratio or whatever! Why aren’t they paying attention to what really matters!?"

I was wrong.

Everyone here is a complete idiot.

Now I finally understand. My client’s a lunatic, their rival is a lunatic, and even their rival’s lawyer is a lunatic.

I’m the only sane one here. But probably, in this situation, sanity isn’t what’s needed.

What’s required here is a solution that’s based on some kind of completely nonsensical, insane logic that no rational person would ever come up with.

"...Mr. Vengo. I’ve thought of a way to get those two to reconcile. Would you be willing to help me try it?"

"Huh? Well, if it’ll really get them to reconcile, I don’t see why not... but why me? Can’t you do it?"

"Uh, well, you know, there’s a big difference between your presence and mine. I just think it’d be more effective if someone with your gravitas were to handle it."

The truth is, I just can’t take this ridiculousness anymore, but of course, I keep that to myself.

"Hah! If you’re going to say it like that, then I guess I have no choice but to help. But what exactly do I need to do?"

"Oh, it’s nothing complicated. Both my client and yours are deeply passionate about French fries, right? Let’s use that. There’s a method in Japan called the 'Ohoka Judgment', also known as the 'Judgement of Solomon'—"

After that, we called both of our clients to the scene.

"Mr. Yamashika. So, what’s the deal? Did you settle it?"

"That’s right, Mr. Vengo. Tell this man that his fries are banned from being sold."

"What!? The one getting banned is you, obviously!"

"What did you say!? You’re the one who copied—"

"Now, now, calm down, both of you."

Mr. Vengo interjected, squeezing his massive frame between the two of them.

"The truth is, after discussing the matter with Mr. Yamashika, we came to the conclusion that this case isn’t something that can be resolved so easily. However, if we take this to court, it could drag on for years. Surely neither of you wants that, right?"

"Of course not," Nohei said. "We’ve spent thirty years trying to revitalize the village. If we don’t start selling soon, the village won’t survive."

"Exactly. So, we came up with a proposal after discussing it. First, we've prepared an empty bag here. Both of you will put your fries into the bag and mix them together. Then, Mr. Yamashika will randomly pull out one fry, and you two will each grab one end of it and pull. Whoever tears off the larger piece wins, and the loser will drop the matter entirely. How about it?"

It was a proposal that, under normal circumstances, would seem utterly ridiculous.

However, the two people who love French fries more than anyone else, after a moment of hesitation, nodded.

"Alright. It's definitely a quick way to settle this, so let's do it."

"I've got no complaints either. We've dedicated our lives to fries, so it's only fitting that we leave our fate to the fries as well."

With that said, the fries being torn apart would probably be glad too.

I mean, couldn't they have done this before dragging the lawyers into it? Please, just do that next time.

"So, I take it you both agree. Let's proceed without delay."

The original fries from both sides were poured into the bag prepared by Mr. Vengo.

After Vengo shuffled the fries around, I picked one out from the bag.

That fry, as if chosen to represent all fries, was a wonderfully long, golden, perfectly cooked French fry.

"Now, both of you, please grab either end of the fry. No turning back now—are you ready? Then… let us commence!"

With Mr. Vengo's silly call, the battle began.

…Or at least, it was supposed to.

After all, it's still just a fry, no matter how perfect. Pulling it from both ends should cause it to tear apart right away.

…Or at least, that's what should have happened.

But the fry showed no sign of tearing.

And that’s because neither of our clients had any intention of pulling it apart.

Even though a little extra effort would have secured them victory, they were like parents being forced to tug at their child, their foreheads sweating with hesitation, frozen in their indecision.

In fact, they both started shouting.

"Oh no, I can’t do something so cruel! These fries are like my own children, made with all my heart and soul—I can’t tear them apart like this!"

"I-I can’t do it either! I’ve never seen such a beautifully shaped fry! To tear it with my fingers would be unthinkable!"

And yet, they’re fine with biting into them.

"…Alright, that’s enough!"

At this point, Mr. Vengo intervened.

"We’ll call the match here. I’ve seen how deeply you both care for French fries. While this match didn’t reach a conclusion, one thing has become clear. Despite the unfortunate paths you’ve taken, your shared love for French fries is genuine. So rather than fighting over something so trivial, wouldn’t it be more important for the two of you to join forces and create even more delicious fries together?"

Mr. Vengo’s utterly irresponsible conclusion.

But for these two, who shared a deep love for French fries, it seemed to strike a chord in their hearts.

"…I’d forgotten. Ran, the lawyer is right. If we keep fighting over this, the only ones who’ll suffer are the fries!"

"…You’re right. Our true goal has always been to have as many people as possible enjoy these fries!"

"That’s right, Ran. To be honest… I’ve wanted to tell you this for a long time. We’ve been pitted against each other by our family circumstances, but from the very start, I’ve always—"

"Oh no! Nohei, the truth is I’ve felt the same way about you for a long time—"

"Oh, Ran!"

"Oh, Nohei!"

"..."

I silently wished from the bottom of my heart.

I hope all of you go to hell. No excuses, just go straight to hell. I hope you fall into hell, painstakingly, step by step.

"Ha-ha-ha-hah! Well, that sure was something!"

The following week.

The old geezer shit-lawyer, after hearing my report, laughed without mercy. I wanted to punch him.

"But now, you've finally come to understand, haven't you? You've seen firsthand how much better it is to get paid just for cleaning up, rather than taking on some half-baked client."

"Shut up, I'm not buying into your nonsense. This time, it just so happened that the clients were weird."

"Well, we'll see about that. Let me tell you something: you should be grateful that this case had a way to be resolved."

"…What do you mean? What do you mean by 'a way to be resolved'?"

"Very well. To drive you further into despair, I'll tell you. It was about five years ago. A woman in her mid-fifties, unmarried, came to me with a request. She wanted to sue for damages, claiming she suffered psychological harm due to harassment from her neighbors."

"What's that supposed to mean? Sounds like a pretty common case."

"Just listen. At first, I thought the same thing you're thinking. But when I asked about the harassment, it all seemed rather strange. She said things like, 'The location of the sugar keeps changing without my knowledge,' or, 'The bookmark I had left in my book was suddenly gone.' That's not all. According to her, the neighbors were constantly bad-mouthing her, but when I investigated, there was no sign of this at all."

"…I see. I think I'm starting to get it."

"It's just as you're imagining. In the end, I had no choice but to conclude that it was all in her head. The area where she lived was relatively new, and her neighbors were all young families.

As an unmarried woman in her mid-fifties living alone, she must have felt out of place. Once she started down the path of distrust, there was no turning back. Eventually, even the slightest misunderstanding became, in her mind, harassment by her neighbors."

And eventually, just seeing her neighbors talking made her think they were whispering insults about her—that's probably how it went.

I see, that sounds plausible. There's no way a case like that could be resolved in the way the client wanted.

"…So how did you handle it?"

"Handle it? There was nothing to handle. The only thing I could do was apologize and return the retainer, saying we wouldn't be able to help her. After that, she spent the following years going from one law firm to the next, but of course, no lawyer would take her case. These days, it's said that any lawyer in the prefecture who hasn't met her is a fake."

"..."

"Now do you understand? I don't know what kind of delusions you had, but this is what being a lawyer really is—dealing with pointless requests and meaningless paperwork. The kind of cases that bring in easy money or ignite a sense of justice are few and far between. And for a rookie lawyer like you, with no backing, you can't afford to be picky about the work you take."

"...Hmph. So what? There are all kinds of lawyers out there. All I have to do is build up a reputation so that I can afford to be selective with my clients."

"Oh, you're absolutely right about that. For the top lawyers, cases come rolling in without them even trying. When that happens, you can make money just by offering paid consultations without accepting the case, and among a hundred cases, you're bound to find at least one that piques your interest. But there's just one important problem with that. It's a fundamental question—how exactly do you plan to become a lawyer who's considered top-tier?"

"That's simple. I just need to take on three or four civil lawsuits and win them all, right?"

"Oh, you're absolutely right. But there's one problem with that. If you take a civil case all the way to the Supreme Court, it can take nearly twenty years. And if you're tied up with one case for that long, you won't be able to make a living. You'll end up taking on cases like the one you just handled, just to make ends meet. So, tell me—over the next twenty years, or even half that time, do you have the confidence to keep taking on cases like this one, just to survive?"

"...Ugh."

As much as I hated to admit it, it was a chilling vision of the future.

Are you telling me I have to keep taking on ridiculous cases like that for the next ten years? That would be nothing short of torture.

"Ha-ha-ha. Looks like that hit a nerve. But don't be so down. There is a way to rise to prominence in just a year or so."

"There… there is!? There's such a convenient method!?"

"Indeed there is, though it's a reckless path. You know that the criminal court system has undergone significant changes, right?"

"Of course I know! I just became a lawyer this year. They've implemented things like a speedier process, the lay judge system, and preliminary hearings, right?"

"Exactly. So, do you know what the percentage of guilty verdicts in criminal trials is?"

"I've been told so many times I'm sick of hearing it. Japan's conviction rate is over 99% every year. Even kids know that."

"Precisely. It's extremely difficult for a defense lawyer to win against the prosecution in criminal trials. But, couldn't you see that as an opportunity?"

"An opportunity?"

I immediately understood what this old man was getting at.

"...I see. In other words, if I manage to pull off a miracle and secure an acquittal in a criminal trial, that alone would be enough to build a solid reputation."

"Exactly. Civil trials are essentially lawyer-versus-lawyer battles. Sure, winning two or three cases would give you a respectable track record, but that doesn't necessarily make you an exceptional lawyer. Plus, civil trials often drag on for ten years or more.

But with the new criminal court system, a case could be resolved in about a week if you play your cards right. And if you manage to win an acquittal, even just twice or three times, in a criminal trial where the conviction rate is over 99%, you'd become a 'miracle lawyer.' People would come flocking from all over Japan, begging you to secure acquittals no matter the cost. You'd be able to sit back, act all high and mighty, and pick and choose your cases."

"...I like the sound of that."

"Right? But reality isn't that convenient. After all, there's a reason why the conviction rate is 99%. The prosecution only brings cases to trial if they're virtually guaranteed to win. What even

the best criminal lawyers can usually do is negotiate a dismissal, not an acquittal. If you really want to break through the prosecution’s ironclad logic, you’d have to be willing to go as far as fabricating evidence."

I grinned.

"Watch your mouth, old man. Calling the methods a lawyer uses to defend their client’s rights 'fabrication' isn’t something I can let slide."

Gotokuji fell silent for a moment, closing his eyes as if in thought.

Then, he muttered softly.

"Hmm. You might actually be able to pull it off."

◆

"I see, so that’s what happened. And that’s how you, Mr. Yamashika, became a criminal law specialist…?"

"Yeah, something like that."

I get it. It’s definitely an unpleasant kind of case. If the first case you ever took on was like that, I can understand why he became so disillusioned with civil law.

In other words, when Mr. Gotokuji recommended criminal cases to Mr. Yamashika...

That was the moment the devil was born.

It’s a story that makes sense. But something still doesn’t sit right with me.

I can’t help but think Mr. Yamashika is still hiding something. Or maybe he’s mixing in some lies.

Sure, the civil case he talked about today was absurd. If every case was like that, I can see how it would sap anyone’s will to continue as a lawyer.

That much I understand.

But even so, Mr. Yamashika settled that case in just one day. In terms of making easy money, there couldn’t have been a more straightforward case.

So, I just can’t believe that it was only cases like this that made him hate civil law.

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？

I can’t help but think that he must have taken on some other civil case that truly made him despair.

Maybe it’s just my baseless suspicion.

To uncover the truth, one would have to read on to chapter 7 of this book.

(The Day a Swindler Was Born -- End)

過去のアヤマチ
～おとうさんと
いっしょ～

A Mistake from the Past: Together with Dad

That day, it was just the three of us at Yamashika Law Office: myself, Kageno, and Mr. Yamashika, who, for some reason, seemed restless, maybe even somewhat excited.

Later, I would come to thank every god, Buddha, and spirit I could think of for the sheer luck that Satsuki happened to be absent that day.

◆

Looking back, I feel like strange things had been happening from the very start.

The fact that Mr. Yamashika had seemed restless all morning might have been a sign of what was to come.

That happened while the three of us—Mr. Yamashika, Kageno, and I—were miserably munching on the takeout lunch I had been sent to buy.

"Hey, Isshaku, listen to this."

"My name is Kamatsuka, but what is it?"

It was somewhat rare for Mr. Yamashika to start a conversation. As I cleaned up my empty bento box, I asked him, assuming his restlessness was probably related to whatever he was about to say.

"Actually, it seems I’ve developed the power of foresight."

—He’s finally lost it…!

That was my initial reaction. I mean, come on, there was no lead-up, and I don’t even believe something like that could exist in the first place.

But there are things you're allowed to say and things you're not. If I were to say, "Oh, so you’ve finally lost it," Mr. Yamashika would surely kill me, dismember me, and afterward, claim in court, "I wasn’t in my right mind," and win an acquittal.

As I struggled to figure out how to respond, Kageno spoke up.

"Oh really? That’s amazing. What kind of predictions can you make now?"

I admired him. Kageno's tone hadn't changed at all from the usual. If it had been me speaking, I'm sure my voice would've wavered out of sheer disbelief.

"Alright then, I'll show you. For example, let's say I turn on the TV right now. Listen, the commercial that comes on will definitely be for laundry detergent."

Mr. Yamashika picked up the TV remote.

"Alright, watch this."

He turned on the TV.

The first thing that appeared on the screen was a rather odd scene: a lion mascot holding a sparkling white plate and waltzing to "The Swan" by Tchaikovsky.

But there was no mistaking it—it was a detergent commercial.

"See? Amazing, right?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess it is… pretty amazing."

I replied with a forced tone, looking slightly downcast, as if I were pitying someone who had just gone through some misfortune.

...At Yamashika Law Office, we're basically idle every day, and the only thing to do is clean. The TV is often left on for no reason.

And commercials are something sponsors pay the TV station to air, so what ads play during which programs is fairly predictable.

In other words, if you watch the same program day after day, you'll naturally start to remember when certain commercials are going to air. Especially with the lunchtime show that famously features just one major sponsor…!

"See? Isn't it amazing? Since yesterday, I've been testing it, and it's been like this the whole time. This has to be a power bestowed upon me by the gods for all the good deeds I've done as a lawyer."

Good deeds? Good deeds, huh? Pfft!

...Wait, this isn't the time to laugh.

I thought to myself:

Why is it that even people who are perfectly sane when testifying in court can't seem to look at themselves objectively when it comes to their own affairs? Maybe our long stretch of boredom had finally made him lose touch with reality.

"But Yamashika, isn't being able to predict commercials kind of useless?"

I had to admire Kageno's ability to ask such a straightforward question without showing even a hint of exasperation. It's probably because he's known Mr. Yamashika for so long. Though, maybe he's secretly laughing inside.

"Well, yeah, I guess. But this is a power granted by the gods, right? It's not going to stop at this level. Okay, I'll make another prediction for you. Listen, in five seconds, the intercom is going to ring, and a client with a juicy case will walk through the door."

"Huh. Well, that would be pretty amazing."

I hoped my lack of enthusiasm in my response would be understandable.

I mean, that's not a prediction—it's just wishful thinking.

But if a client actually showed up after this, even I would be shocked, though the world doesn't work that conveniently.

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds——

All three of us stared at the intercom connected to the front door.

It was a short amount of time, but the atmosphere grew unbearably heavy with silence.

I was desperately trying to figure out how I was going to cover for Mr. Yamashika. After all, I'd have no choice but to help him save face. Otherwise, I'd probably end up with more errands to run, as punishment for seeing through his lack of foresight.

And then, five seconds passed.

The intercom didn't ring.

Well, it was the expected outcome. There's no such thing as foresight in this world.

I was just about to turn to Mr. Yamashika, who was starting to look sullen, and offer a standard excuse like, "Maybe you're just having an off day today."

That’s when it happened.

A client did arrive.

However, instead of ringing the intercom, they just opened the door and walked right into the office.

It was a little girl, maybe five or six years old, with chubby, adorable cheeks.

She looked like she’d just come back from kindergarten, wearing a navy jacket over a checked jumper-style skirt, which looked like some kind of uniform. Her hair was cut in a bob, her round eyes sparkling. She was so innocent-looking, completely out of place in a law office like ours.

"Look, see? A client came."

Mr. Yamashika said, his words sounding forced, as if he were trying to convince himself.

Kageno, remaining calm, replied.

"Really? That’s strange. Didn’t your prediction include a client bringing a juicy case? That kid looks more like a lost child who wandered in."

"H-Hmph. Don’t judge by appearances. Maybe her parents are rich."

Apparently, to Mr. Yamashika, a "juicy case" means one that comes with a fat paycheck. Thinking that I used to respect this man makes me want to go back in time and punch myself.

Unaware of the low-level conversation happening among the adults, the little girl toddled towards us, like Maggie Simpson in her snowsuit. You could almost hear that pacifier-sucking sound.

I had to step in. If she were suddenly approached by someone as surly and rough-looking as Mr. Yamashika or Kageno, it might scar her for life.

I bent down to her eye level, trying to make my expression as gentle as possible, and asked her,

"Um, sweetie, what brings you here? Do you need help with something?"

After spending so much time at this office, where I’m either angry, frustrated, or exhausted, trying to smile like this was a bit of a challenge. Ugh, I hate that I even have to think about this.

But then, as if completely ignoring my kindness, the girl walked right up to Mr. Yamashika.

She pointed at him and said something utterly shocking, with a big smile on her face.

"Daddy."

Time stopped.

I’m not even exaggerating. At that moment, in that place, time clearly froze at Yamashika Law Office. Neither I, nor Mr. Yamashika, nor Kageno moved an inch. We didn’t even blink, and I’m not sure any of us were even breathing.

The only exception was the little girl, standing there with a bewildered look on her face. Later, Kageno would confirm this by saying:

"I'll... I'll tell you exactly what happened. I was just sitting on the sofa, and before I knew it, I was in the future, five minutes ahead. I know it sounds crazy, and I don’t understand it either. My head was about to explode... It wasn’t anything simple like a time leap or relativity theory. No, it was something far more terrifying—just a glimpse of something truly horrifying..."

"Huh? What’s wrong with everyone?"

The one who brought us back to reality was the little girl, her words slightly babyish.

Regaining myself, I immediately pressed Mr. Yamashika for answers.

"T-Teacher! What on earth is going on!? Could this girl possibly be… your…!?"

"No, no! That’s impossible!"

Honestly, it didn’t matter to me whether Zenko Yamashika had a child or not. But I had been put in a position where I had to look up to him as my teacher and seek his guidance. The idea of him having an illegitimate child... well, I’d rather avoid such a disgraceful situation. People might start looking at me weirdly too.

At this moment, Mr. Yamashika knelt in front of the little girl. Right, when talking to children, you should meet them at eye level. I was surprised that Mr. Yamashika could be so considerate.

"Hey. Why do you think I'm your daddy?"

"Hmm? I dunno, but Mama said to call the most important-looking person here Daddy."

The situation was clearer than daylight.

In other words, here's what had happened: Mr. Yamashika's illegitimate child had been sent here by her mother.

In short, Mr. Yamashika was a scumbag.

What was even scarier was that Mr. Yamashika didn't deny it at all. In fact, he looked pale, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead, as if the girl had hit a sore spot.

In short, this meant Mr. Yamashika had a clue why this was happening.

"H-Hold on. How old are you?"

The little girl opened her hand wide.

"Five!"

"So, she's five, huh?" Hearing that, I let out a small sigh of relief. "Now that I think about it, Mr. Yamashika is only in his early twenties. There's no way he could've had a child when he was so young."

"...The math checks out."

"It does!?"

What a terrible lawyer!

"What on earth were you doing five years ago? Seriously!"

"Well, I mean, come on. For a guy at fifteen or sixteen, when there's a hole, there's a way."

"...I don't think that's how the expression goes, but let's not dig into that in front of the kid."

Then, Mr. Yamashika turned back to the little girl.

"Hey, is your mom, Yoshiko, doing well?"

"Mama’s name isn’t Yoshiko. It’s Yoshimi."

"...Tch, didn’t fall for that leading question, huh?"

"What are you doing, trying to trick a child!?"

This was getting really bad. I’ve never heard of a lawyer losing their license over having an illegitimate child, but could this be the first case? If that happened, what would become of me, who’s been apprenticing under Mr. Yamashika…?

No, wait. This isn’t the time to be thinking about myself. From what I’m gathering, this girl might have grown up in a really unfortunate situation without a father. I’m an adult. I can take care of myself, but this girl can’t. Right now, more than worrying about myself, I should be concerned for her—that’s what a decent human being would do.

But even though I know that… I can feel myself becoming a worse person by the minute. Ugh, adulthood sucks. It really does.

And just then—

"Yamashika, looks like we’ve got another guest."

At Kageno’s words, we turned to the entrance.

Once again, someone had come in without using the intercom—a strangely beautiful woman.

"Oh! Mama!"

The little girl happily ran over, and the woman gently picked her up.

What a heartwarming, beautiful scene. If only Mr. Yamashika, standing next to me with a vacant, soulless expression, wasn’t ruining it.

Still holding the little girl, the woman approached us.

She was truly a beautiful woman. I’d guess she was in her late twenties, though maybe she was over thirty and just hiding it well with makeup—such cynical thoughts were entirely Mr. Yamashika's fault.

In any case, perhaps because she’d given birth, she had this mature, maternal beauty about her.

"It’s been a while, li'l Zenko."

"...Can you at least drop the ‘li'l’?"

So, as expected, they knew each other.

"Oh, sorry. You’re right, you’re not a kid anymore. Let me rephrase. It’s been a while, Mr. Yamashika."

"...Could you two leave for a bit?"

Mr. Yamashika said, turning to me and Kageno.

Well, there was no helping it. This time the situation clearly called for it. It was obvious that this was going to be a private conversation, not something outsiders should hear.

"Alright. Just this once, I’ll do as you ask."

Kageno nodded obediently, probably thinking the same thing I was, and moved to the next room. Honestly, I didn’t want to be here either. I had no desire to get caught up in what was likely to become a bloodbath.

That said, even though I didn’t want to be here, I was very curious about what kind of conversation would unfold.

Luckily, this rundown old law office had one major flaw.

The doors were thin.

So, as soon as we entered the next room, Kageno and I immediately pressed our ears against the door. It wasn’t snooping; it was healthy curiosity.

"It’s been a while, Yoshimi."

"Oh my, it’s rude to call your elder by her first name, don’t you think? We’re strangers now, so could you call me by my surname?"

Oof, she threw the first punch right at the start.

"...Fine. So, Moriyama, what brings you here today?"

Mr. Yamashika’s voice sounded strained, as if he’d squeezed it out. Amazing. To think someone could put Mr. Yamashika at such a disadvantage. He must be feeling incredibly guilty.

"Well, first, let me introduce her. I named this child Tomoyo. Come on, Tomoyo, say hello."

"Okay! Um, hello! I'm Tomoyo. I’m five years old!"

"Good job! You’re such a smart girl, Tomoyo."

"Hehe~"

…Despite the warm conversation, Mr. Yamashika’s mood was growing darker and darker.

"I don’t care about introductions. I asked why the heck you’re here."

"Hey, we’re in front of a child. Could you watch your language?"

"...What business do you have with me today?"

Wow. Today, Mr. Yamashika was not only a scumbag but also incredibly pathetic.

"Oh? Don’t you understand? I know you were just a high school student back then, but now you’re a famous lawyer. I figured you could at least fulfill your duties as this child’s father."

Once again, time seemed to stop in the office.

W-Wait… So, in other words, she’s asking for… child support? Incredible. I never thought Mr. Yamashika would become a living, breathing example of a paternity suit in front of me...!

"I appreciate the trouble you’ve gone to in bringing her here, but—"

For some reason, Mr. Yamashika’s voice suddenly sounded more confident.

"I’m afraid I have no duty to fulfill."

"Oh? And why is that? Don't you dare tell me you have no idea what this is about?"

"W-Well, leaving that aside, this child is not mine. She has a father—someone else."

"Oh…?"

The woman looked genuinely surprised.

"When did you figure it out?"

"From the moment the kid walked in. Once I calmed down and thought about it, it was obvious. For someone meeting her father for the first time, she didn’t seem nearly excited enough. It was all an act."

That’s a lie. That was 100% a lie.

I know all too well about Mr. Yamashika's true nature now. From the moment the little girl said "Daddy," he was seriously freaking out. He may have only realized now, after regaining his composure, that it was all an act, but earlier he was definitely shaken.

Judging from that reaction, I wouldn't be surprised if two or three more offenses came to light.

"Besides, you already had a proper husband back then."

...He just blurted out something outrageous.

Wait, does that mean...

Did he have an affair with a married woman!?

I’m shocked. Absolutely appalled. I had always thought he was a bit off, a scumbag, but this is beyond that. He’s a monster. Lower than an animal. Maybe I should seriously rethink my association with him.

"Yes, now that you’ve figured it out, I suppose there’s no point hiding it. That’s right, this child has a proper father."

You too!?

So, what!? Even though she had a husband, she still slept with Mr. Yamashika!?

Maybe her husband was away for work and she was sexually frustrated...? What a scary world we live in. I silently thanked my lucky stars that Satsuki wasn’t here today.

"So, the child has a father. That’s good to hear. So? What’s the real reason you came here? Surely, it wasn’t just to blackmail me."

"Blackmail, huh...? You’re not entirely wrong. The truth is, I have a favor to ask you."

"A favor, huh? Well, as long as you’re paying, I’ll handle it."

"It is a favor, yes. But I’m sure you’ll take it on for free."

"...Don’t be ridiculous. Why would I ever do that?"

"Oh, are you sure? You don’t want me telling people about your little affair, do you?"

"!? "

I could hear Mr. Yamashika's silent scream.

Peeking through the crack in the door, I saw sweat pouring down his forehead. I had never seen Mr. Yamashika look so pale.

What on earth was going on? Not even the Bar Association, which holds the power to revoke his license, nor the police or prosecutors, could shake Mr. Yamashika like this. It was just one woman, a mother with a child. Should I be saying that mothers are strong, or that women are terrifying? Ah, if only I could handle Mr. Yamashika as easily as she does...!

"If you try something like that, it won't just be me. Your family will be dragged into this mess too."

"Oh? Is that so? On one hand, we have a famous undefeated lawyer known nationwide. On the other, we have just a salaryman's wife. Even a child could figure out which side would take the bigger hit. Right, Tomoyo?"

"Right~?"

There's no way she understood what was going on, but perhaps sensing the mood, little Tomoyo, cradled in her mother's arms, happily chimed in.

"F-Fine. Let's hear what you have to say."

He caved! He actually caved...!

I think this is the first time I've ever seen him give in so easily...

"It's about this child's father."

"...You mean your husband?"

"Of course. Who else would it be?"

"...No, go on."

It seems even Mr. Yamashika is starting to grow suspicious.

"Well, my husband... His name is Minehito. Lately, it seems like he's been getting into gambling."

...This conversation suddenly got way more real. Ignoring a beautiful wife and cute daughter to gamble? That's definitely a problem. At the very least, this doesn't seem like the time to be teasing Mr. Yamashika.

"Getting into gambling? So it's not confirmed?"

"I'm not sure. You see, Tomoyo will be starting elementary school soon, so I reduced Minehito's allowance. He shouldn't have much money to spend, but lately, every time he's off work, he goes out somewhere. And yet, his wallet is always full of cash. So I can't help but think he's gambling."

"There are plenty of ways to make money besides gambling. He could be robbing places, for instance."

"No way. He doesn't have the guts or the nerve for something like that."

Wow. She's casually throwing some serious shade at her husband.

"I see. Well, gambling, huh? It's hard to imagine him betting on dice games or anything like that these days. Could it be pachinko?"

"I don't know. I can't exactly follow him around. But there is one thing that comes to mind. There was a turning point, after which Minehito's strange behavior started. Do you know Uncle Ranch?"

"Well, I've at least heard of it."

I know it. Along with Father Ranch and KO Ranch, it's quite a famous place in the metropolitan area. Although it's called a ranch, they don't raise livestock for meat; it's more of a theme park where people can interact with animals. I've seen the TV commercials a few times.

"What about it?"

"About two months ago, we went there as a family. After that, every time Minehito had a day off, he started going out."

"Hmm, the ranch, huh. Did something strange happen there?"

"Yes. There was a time when we split up because I had to take Tomoyo to the restroom. We met up again soon after, but I noticed that Minehito was really focused on one of the attractions at the ranch."

"Hmm. What kind of attraction?"

"The piglet race."

"The... piglet race?"

"Yeah! It’s super cute! The little piggies run with all their might, snorting and grunting! But sometimes they start running in the wrong direction or even start digging holes!"

Tomoyo responded with childlike excitement.

"So, watching that race made him realize he wanted to try horse racing or something?"

"That’s what I think. I once found something that looked like a betting slip in Minehito’s pocket."

"I see. Well, I understand the situation. So, what exactly do you want me to do?"

"Don’t you get it? I want you to bring my husband back. Give him a scare so he’ll never want to gamble again. You’re good at that kind of thing, aren’t you?"

I see. That makes sense. If it were any other lawyer, they might not be able to help, but Mr. Yamashika is particularly skilled at intimidation and harassment. Going to a regular family counseling center wouldn’t be nearly as effective.

"...Fine, I’ll take it on."

How unusual. Mr. Yamashika agreeing to something so easily. I suppose he had no choice, given that she was blackmailing him with the affair.

Well, any father who leaves his family to go gambling on his days off deserves what’s coming to him. Let’s see what Mr. Yamashika can do.

"Thank you. You’re a great help."

"But there’s one condition."

"Oh? What is it?"

"This is the last time. I’m only doing this for free because of our past relationship. Next time, I’ll charge you."

"Thank you. Yes, I understand. This will be the last time. As long as my husband gets his act together, that’s all I need."

...And with that, the conversation wrapped up, and Moriyama and her daughter left.

"Now then, Kageno."

As soon as we returned from the next room, Mr. Yamashika bluntly spoke.

"You were listening, weren't you? I'm not too keen on doing this job for free, so give me a hand."

"Fine. If word got out that I was working for a lawyer who had an affair, my reputation would take a hit too."

Kageno's words were sharp, and Mr. Yamashika winced.

"A-Anyway. I need you to tail this Minehito guy and find out what gambling den he's been going to."

"Don't worry, there's no need for that."

"...What? What do you mean?"

"Didn't she say that things started getting weird after they went to Uncle Ranch? And that there was something like a betting slip in his pocket?"

"Now that you mention it, she did say something like that. He was really engrossed in the piglet race, right? Does that have something to do with it?"

"Yeah, it does. You see, there's an underground area at Uncle Ranch. There's an illegal racetrack there. Well, it's not horses, so let's call it an illegal pig race track."

Time stopped for the third time.

…Or at least it felt like it.

Well, it wasn't quite as shocking as when I found out Mr. Yamashika had a child. But the idea of gambling on piglet races left me more speechless than surprised.

"…C-Can that even be called a race? And who the hell decided to make something like that a gambling event?"

"Who knows? Apparently, some enthusiasts find the cuteness of the piglets and the unpredictability of what might happen really appealing."

"…I see."

Amazing. Mom, Dad, Kanto is a crazy place. I never would've imagined that people were gambling on piglet races.

"Well, if that's the case, we can move quickly. So, how does one participate in this thing?"

"Ah. Apparently, the entrance is through one of the shops. If you tell the clerk the password, they'll take you there."

…This just keeps getting crazier.

Still, this is shaping up to be a pretty serious situation. From what I've heard, this piglet race seems to be illegal. And illegal gambling is a serious crime. According to Article 185 of the Japanese Penal Code, gambling is punishable by law. There's an exception if you're betting on something trivial, like a meal for fun, but otherwise, if money is involved, it's illegal gambling, no questions asked. That's how dangerous gambling is. It would be terrible if the father of such a cute daughter were arrested for gambling.

Though in cases of gambling, it's usually the organizers who get arrested, the participants sometimes get let off with a warning. Still, it's a crime. If there's one cop looking to score some points, that's all it takes for it to be over.

◆

And so, on the following Sunday.

Mr. Yamashika and I headed to Uncle Ranch, where the piglet races were supposedly taking place.

"…So, why are you here, Isshaku?"

"My name is Kamatsuka. What's wrong with me being here? I'm curious about how to save someone who's fallen into gambling. Besides, I've been stuck doing nothing but cleaning lately, so let me at least see this."

"Hmph. Fine. As long as you don't get in the way, do as you please."

"Yes, yes, I understand."

Lately, I've been realizing more and more that life can't be navigated with just dreams and ideals. There's so much that's unreasonable in life.

Mr. Yamashika's teachings come in handy when faced with those unreasonable situations. Since I've been wasting my days just scrubbing floors, I need to make sure I study these things thoroughly when I get the chance.

"…By the way, teacher. There's something I'd like to ask."

"Huh? What is it?"

"That supermarket bag you're carrying… what's in it?"

"This?"

With that, Teacher pulled something out of the bag. At first glance, it looked like an onion, but—

"You can tell just by looking. It's garlic."

"Right, it's definitely garlic. But what are you planning to do with that garlic?"

"…It's too much trouble to explain. Just follow me quietly, and you'll figure it out soon enough."

"Uh, okay."

…Well, I had a feeling he'd say that.

And so, we arrived at Uncle Ranch and headed straight for the piglet racetrack.

I have to say, the place was quite peaceful.

As far as the eye could see, there were grasslands.

Over there, a cow was mooing, and over here, ducks were quacking.

All the visitors were families or couples, without a single drunken middle-aged man causing a scene or loud groups of high school girls. It was a peaceful scene that seemed to soothe my heart, which had become hardened by city life and a certain lawyer.

To others, we might've looked like a young couple on a date, but for me, that was far from the truth. In fact, it was an insult. I'm ashamed to admit that there was a time when I admired Mr.

Yamashika, but ever since I met him in person, I haven't felt a single shred of romantic interest—not even for a millisecond.

And there it was, in one corner of this peaceful ranch.

The piglet racetrack.

It was a small track, simply enclosed by a fence. It couldn't have been more than twenty meters around.

Inside the track, piglets and children were together, each child trying to get their assigned piglet to run by smacking its rear or clapping their hands, struggling desperately. But the piglets didn't seem to care, running off in random directions, digging holes, or flipping over. The children's efforts went completely unrewarded, while the parents watched and laughed from outside the track.

"What a peaceful scene. Can illegal gambling really be happening in a place like this?"

"Well, people will gamble on just about anything, so it wouldn't be strange. Look, isn't that the shop Kageno mentioned?"

Mr. Yamashika pointed to a small shop with a large soft-serve ice cream sign. It was the kind of shop you'd typically see at amusement parks, selling things like soft-serve ice cream, popcorn, and soft drinks.

According to Kageno's story, this was supposedly the entrance to the underground piglet race track. It seemed pretty far-fetched, though.

"Hey, Isshaku. You go and say the password."

"What!? Why do I have to say it? And my name is—"

"Shut up. Do you really think I'm going to say such a stupid password?"

"Then don't make me do it! Didn't your teachers ever teach you not to make others do things you don't want to do?"

"Too bad. My teachers always said, 'Do what others hate before they can.'"

"…Those teachers were definitely misinterpreting the meaning."

"Enough with the chatter. I'm not asking you; I'm ordering you. You do realize you don't have the right to refuse, right? Or would you rather spend every day cleaning from now on?"

"Uuugh..."

This is how it always ends up…

Reluctantly, I approached the shop in tears.

"Welcome! What can I get for you?"

The young shop clerk greeted me with as much enthusiasm as a street vendor.

Ugh, do I really have to say that stupid password? If I'm wrong, I'll be so embarrassed.

Well, this clerk seems like the type I could laugh it off with, so there's no point in hesitating. I took a deep breath and spoke.

"Umm... W-What's the difference between char siu and roast pork?"

The clerk's eyes seemed to light up with a flash.

"Well, it's kind of like the difference between cutlets and tonkatsu, don't you think?"

"B-But don't you think cutlets wouldn't really work in a rice bowl?"

"…Let me show you the way. Please, follow me."

This is ridiculous. Who came up with this password? Well, I suppose I shouldn't expect to understand the minds of people who turn piglet races into a gambling event. And the fact that this was real…

The clerk led us to the back of the shop. He opened the door with a creak.

To my surprise, instead of a passage leading further into the shop, there was a staircase descending into a basement.

"Please, head down."

"Okay."

With that, Mr. Yamashika confidently walked down the stairs. The fact that he could remain so composed in this situation was a talent in itself. Hesitantly, I followed him.

What greeted us was a bizarre sight.

The first thing I heard was the high-pitched voice of an announcer.

"And finally, Narita Pig-ian has taken the lead! Narita Pig-ian is rounding the fourth corner in first place! Only 400 centimeters to go!"

"There's nothing stopping him now! Narita Pig-ian has entered the lead! Oh, but here comes Pork Neck Rudolf closing in! Pork Neck Rudolf from the outside! Pork Neck Rudolf from the outside! Narita Pig-ian is running, running! Pork Neck Rudolf from the outside! Did Pork Neck Rudolf overtake him? Did Pork Neck Rudolf overtake him? Tosho Roast is coming up from the inside! Tosho Roast from the inside! Ah—Pork Neck Rudolf takes the lead!"

…Well, forget Pork Neck Rudolf, Tosho Roast sounds delicious. At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a Deep Spare Ribs or something.

No, no, that's not the point to focus on.

The first thing that caught my eye was the crowd of people. Grown men shouting in joy and despair.

And at the center of it all was—a racetrack. Yes, one just like the piglet racetrack above ground.

Except for one key difference.

The piglets weren't being guided by children; they were chasing small rabbit plush toys. The piglets were chasing the little rabbits attached to sticks, just like a dog race. I've never heard of piglets having a natural instinct to chase small animals. This must be the result of some training.

"Narita Pig-ian has lost the Triple Crown! The winner is Pork Neck Rudolf, Pork Neck Rudolf! There's a collective groan from the crowd! Pork Neck Rudolf, who made a comeback, has taken down the top favorite!"

At that moment, betting slips—or rather, "pig slips"—fluttered around the racetrack like confetti.

"Woooahhh!! It hit! Twelve times the payout!!"

"Ahhhh, damn it! What are you doing, Narita Pig-ian, you spineless pig!"

Seriously, what are these people even doing, coming all the way here for this?

"I mean, they're really holding piglet races down here…"

"Well, it's a good plan to appeal to the middle-aged crowd."

Mr. Yamashika’s response was indifferent.

According to what Kageno told us, the story goes like this:

Originally, the ranch was struggling to stay in business.

They tried everything to attract customers, offering all kinds of events aimed at children, but nothing really worked.

So, they changed their approach. Instead of trying to win over the children, they decided to target the ones holding the wallets—the fathers.

And what’s the quickest way to appeal to adults? Gambling. That’s why they opened this underground piglet racetrack.

The plan worked like a charm, and soon, many families started visiting. The fathers would leave their kids with their wives and sneak down here to gamble.

I can understand the reasoning, but… why did it have to be gambling?

"Alright, let’s start looking around."

Mr. Yamashika pulled a photo out of his pocket. It was a picture of the husband given to us by the wife, for identification purposes.

Short hair, tall, on the skinny side. He’s supposed to be nearly forty, but he looks a bit younger.

"Ah, teacher, could that be him?"

It wasn’t easy with so many people around, but since it was a limited underground space, we eventually found someone who looked like him. I pointed.

He was holding a pig slip and smiling happily. It looked like he won the last race.

"Hmm, looks like that’s him. He’s really here."

After comparing the photo with the man in front of him, Mr. Yamashika nodded and approached the man.

"Hey. You’re Minehito Moriyama, right?"

"Hm?"

The man turned to us with a suspicious look.

"Yeah, that's me. And you guys are?"

"Sorry to bother you, I'm lawyer Zenko Yamashika. I'm here on behalf of your wife."

"A-A lawyer?! My wife hired you?! W-What's this all about?!"

It must've been the mention of two ominous keywords—"lawyer" and "wife"—because he couldn't hide his surprise.

Mr. Yamashika explained. He told him that his wife had hired us to bring her husband, who seemed to be addicted to gambling, back onto the right path.

But the moment Moriyama heard this, he seemed to regain his composure.

"Oh, that's all? Well, in that case, I'm not obligated to follow any orders. You see, even if she's my wife, she has no right to tell me what to do on my day off."

"W-Wait just a minute!" I couldn't hold back and interrupted. "You have a wife and a lovely daughter, don't you?! If you're wasting your time gambling instead of spending it with them, that's a serious problem!"

"I'm a grown man over 20 years old. What's the issue if I want to gamble? Besides, I haven't lost any money here. The paddock here is special, you see. Unlike horse racing, you can get up close and personally examine the pigs before they race. Since I graduated with a degree in veterinary science, reading these pigs is easy for me. Winning here is a piece of cake."

"B-But! This isn't horse racing; it's illegal gambling! It's a serious crime! If the police find out, you'll be arrested!"

"That's only if they find out, right? There's no way they will. What police officer would ever suspect there's an underground piglet racetrack beneath a piglet race course? Is that all you wanted to say? Well, I'm off. The next paddock is about to start."

"Oh, I see. Sorry to interrupt."

With that, Mr. Yamashika backed off surprisingly easily. Moriyama walked away casually.

"W-What should we do, teacher? This isn't going to be easy…"

"Don't worry, I expected this much from the moment I heard he was hooked on gambling."

"Wha…"

As expected of Mr. Yamashika. So, does that mean he already has a plan?

"For now, let’s head back above ground."

"Uh, outside? Why…?"

"It’s nothing major. It’s just that the cell phones don’t work underground."

"Oh."

As usual, I couldn’t read his thoughts. I had no choice but to follow him quietly.

…But when I found out who Teacher was calling once we got back above ground, I was in for quite a shock.

"Hey, is this the police?"

"Whaaat?!"

Why the police?!

"This is lawyer Yamashika speaking. …Yeah, that Yamashika. …Yeah, yeah, I get it, calm down, I’m not calling to pick a fight. I just happened to stumble upon an illegal gambling operation, so I thought I’d let you know. If you hurry, you can catch a lot of people red-handed. It’ll be a nice score for you, don’t you think?"

"Whhaaaat?!"

A tip-off?! If you do that now, Moriyama’s husband will be…!

…After the call ended, I confronted Teacher.

"T-Teacher! What was that?! Why would you report him out of the blue?! If the police come rushing in now, li'l Tomoyo’s father will be arrested for gambling!"

"That’s fine. Once someone’s hooked on gambling, it’s nearly impossible to get them out. Sometimes, they need to experience something painful, like getting arrested, to snap out of it."

"I understand that, but…! He’s a father! If he gets a criminal record, it’ll be terrible for his child!"

"Calm down. I'm not a monster. I'll take that into consideration. Anyway, you're just tagging along, so stay quiet and watch."

"O-Okay…"

At this point, I couldn't argue anymore. All I could do was trust in whatever "consideration" Teacher mentioned.

After that, we headed back down to the underground piglet racetrack.

"Hey, Isshaku. I'm going to go check out this paddock thing. You stay here."

"…Okay."

I had no idea what was going on anymore. What's the point of Teacher looking at the paddock? Could he possibly be planning to place a bet himself…?

No, that's definitely not the case. After all, he just tipped off the police.

Ugh, this is ridiculous. Why am I the only one worrying about all this? As Mr. Yamashika says, "In for a penny, in for a pound." Now that it's come to this, I'll just sit tight and see this through to the end.

──Or so I thought, but when Mr. Yamashika returned from the "paddock," or rather, the piglet petting area, something had changed.

"…Huh? teacher, you were holding a bag with garlic just a while ago, right? What happened to it?"

"Oh, that? I gave it to this piglet."

"Huh?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I tilted my head in confusion.

Just then, the next race seemed to have started, and once again, the announcer's voice echoed through the venue.

"All right, the piglets have entered their gates. And they're off… but, oh no, an unexpected accident! It's digging! Inari Oink has succumbed to its pig instincts! Inari Oink has started digging a hole! The crowd is in an uproar! There are no truffles there, Inari Oink! And coming out in the lead is number 7, Miso Pork Cutlet Bourbon!"

"Aaaaahhhh!? No way! What the hell are you doing, Inari Oink?!"

The one screaming was Moriyama. See? That's why gambling never pays off.

"Miso Pork Cutlet Bourbon is in the lead! It looks like it's ready for anything! Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower is closing in! Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower from the outside! The yellow cap belongs to Tokai Pig! Miso Pork Cutlet Bourbon is running, running! Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower from the outside! Did Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower overtake it? Did Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower overtake it? Tokai Pig from the inside! Ah—Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower takes the lead! Miso Pork Cutlet Bourbon couldn't make it two wins in a row! It's Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower! Pork Cutlet Bowl Shower wins!"

*TL Note: I suppose fans of Uma Musume might be able to tell, but the names of all 7 piglets are references to famous horses

Once again, the venue was filled with cheers and groans, and confetti fluttered through the air.

But that's when it happened.

What we feared came to pass.

"It's the police!! Stay where you are, all of you!!"

Mr. Yamashika's tip-off had worked. A swarm of uniformed police officers stormed in with a roar.

"Damn, it's the cops! Run!"

"Hold it! Don't run! You're all under arrest for illegal gambling and running a gambling den!"

The place became even more chaotic than during the race.

Guests ran in all directions, and the police were tackling them down.

"W-What do we do, Teacher?!"

"Calm down. This has nothing to do with us."

"B-But still!"

Of course, in a situation like this, there's no way the police would let us off the hook.

Soon, one of the officers spotted us.

"Hey, you two! Get over here! You're under arrest!"

But that officer's face quickly twisted in shock.

"Huh?! You're…!"

As expected of the famous Mr. Yamashika from the legal world. The officer who had approached us changed his expression the moment he saw Teacher.

"You know who I am?"

"Y-Yeah, I know. You're Attorney Yamashika, right? I heard you were the one who reported this case…"

"Good, that saves time. Yes, I'm the one who tipped you off. Thanks to me, you've got a good score here, right? You're not seriously thinking of arresting the one responsible for this success, are you?"

"Ugh, damn it… Fine, I'll let you off this time! Now get out of here!"

"Much obliged."

Phew. I felt a bit relieved. I'm still a law student after all, and getting arrested for illegal gambling would be a bit much.

"But, teacher, what about Moriyama? That officer's about to arrest him now."

"Don't worry, the real show starts now."

With that, Mr. Yamashika began walking through the still-chaotic venue.

"Damn it, let me go! I wasn't gambling, I was just here by chance!"

"Yeah, right! It's state power abuse! I'll sue you!"

"Shut up! Save it for the station!"

Ignoring the commotion, Teacher headed toward Moriyama.

"P-Please, give me a break! If my wife finds out I got arrested, she'll kill me!"

"No can do. A crime is a crime. Now, come on."

The bravado he had earlier was gone, and Moriyama was now desperately bowing his head, but the officer showed no mercy.

"Sorry, but could you wait a moment?"

The one who interrupted was Mr. Yamashika.

"Huh? You again? I told you to get out of here already."

"Unfortunately, I can't do that. I've been hired by this man's wife to look after him. As his lawyer, I can't just let this go."

"L-Lawyer…!"

Moriyama looked at Teacher with sparkling, grateful eyes. Well, for him right now, Mr. Yamashika must seem like a savior, but still, how fickle.

"Yeah, I see. But this guy was holding betting slips. He's clearly caught red-handed for illegal gambling. I can't just let him go."

"Well, that's too bad, but there's no case for illegal gambling here."

"What?"

…Huh? What is Teacher talking about?

"What do you mean? It's obvious they were participating in illegal gambling."

For once, I agreed with the officer.

"No, you're mistaken. Come with me, I'll show you proof."

With that, Mr. Yamashika walked towards the racetrack for some reason. Inside, about ten piglets were milling around.

"Alright, take a whiff of this one's breath."

I had no idea what was going on. Teacher had picked up one of the piglets and said that.

"Huh? What's that supposed to accomplish? Why would I do that?"

"Just do it. Come on."

Reluctantly, the officer brought his nose close to the piglet's mouth, as Teacher had insisted.

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His face immediately twisted in disgust.

"Ugh, what the hell?! This piglet reeks of garlic!"

"Exactly. As you can smell, only this piglet has garlic breath. Do you see? That means the organizers here mixed garlic into the feed of just one piglet. They used that nutritional boost to influence the outcome of the race. In other words, the whole thing was rigged."

I see. That makes sense. In ancient times, athletes supposedly ate garlic before competitions… So, Teacher brought that garlic with him for this purpose?

"…Alright, I get what you're saying. But… so what? What does that have to do with illegal gambling?"

"Oh, you don't get it? Listen, for something to be considered gambling, there has to be an element of chance. If the outcome is rigged so that only one side can win, it's not gambling—it's fraud. Therefore, everyone here was a victim of fraud, manipulated into betting. That means there's no case for illegal gambling."

"W-What?!"

W-What kind of twisted logic is that?! And the garlic? That's all part of Teacher's scheme!

The officer was dumbfounded. No surprise there. I was dumbfounded too.

Teacher put a hand on the officer's shoulder and whispered, as if he were offering a bribe.

"If I shout that out loud right now, every customer here will start using the same excuse, you know? That would be a hassle for you guys, right? So here's the deal: you can do whatever you want with the other guests. But you're going to release Moriyama right now."

"Ugh…"

"It's not a bad deal. You've already made a big bust with this illegal gambling ring, haven't you? Don't push your luck too far, or you might regret it."

"Damn it… Fine. Do what you want!"

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…And that's the story of how this case ended.

In this way, Mr. Yamashika successfully completed the job he was hired for.

Moriyama, who had narrowly escaped arrest, was so shaken by the experience that he promised, "I'll never gamble again," and headed home. He's probably being scolded harshly by his wife and daughter right about now.

But the real demon here is Mr. Yamashika. His methods might be something to learn from, but they're definitely not something to imitate.

In this case, how many people ended up as victims, I wonder. Well, there's no doubt that everyone involved had actually committed the crime of illegal gambling, and though most of them were arrested, they'll likely avoid prosecution under the excuse of having "reflected on their actions"...

But that aside, I made one firm resolution through this incident:

If I ever participate in a scavenger hunt and pick up a slip of paper that says "something crooked," I won't hesitate to bring this good-for- nothing lawyer with me—

(A Mistake from the Past: Together with Dad -- End)

*Note: This story is a work of fiction and has no connection whatsoever to any real-life ranch.

オコサマタチの夜

Night of the Little Ones

"Mr. Komori! Mr. Komori!? You're in there, right? Please answer!"

Uncle Yamada was pounding on the door hard. But there was no response at all.

"This is strange. The door's locked, and it doesn't look like he went out. There's no way the owner would oversleep."

"Could something have happened to him? Like, maybe he fell asleep with the window open?"

That simple question came from Uncle Yamada's niece, and also my friend, Rin Yamada. After all, we were in a pension deep in the mountains in the dead of winter. If someone slept with the window open, it wouldn't be strange if they froze to death.

"Nah, no chance of that. He's the owner, you know. How many years do you think he's lived here?"

"Then why hasn't he come out yet? Maybe he's sick? He is pretty old, after all."

This was said by one of the pension's guests, Ms. Histerie Isoyama, with a hint of worry. As her name suggests, she's a half-Japanese woman with French citizenship. She's supposed to be quite young, but because of her thick makeup, she looks older than she really is—an unlucky woman in that sense.

"Huh?"

At that moment—

"Hey, look! There's some red liquid seeping from under the door!"

The one who said this strange thing, while crouched near the door, was good ol' Taro. His name is Suzuki Taro, a name so plain and uninspired that it makes you suspect it's fake, and he works at this pension. He's a young man with glasses and a bow tie, which is a rather odd fashion choice. Well, calling him a young man might be a bit misleading. That's because, though he has the body of an adult, his mental age is extraordinarily low—a peculiar characteristic of his. Apparently, it stems from when he was kidnapped by an evil organization long ago. To survive there, he had to keep acting like an innocent child, and that survival tactic became so ingrained in him that even after growing up physically, he still thought, "Hey, pretending to be a kid has its perks, right?" And so, he hasn't been able to break away from that comfortable mindset, continuing his childish behavior even now. On top of that, he's extremely shy and can't say anything important without borrowing someone else's words.

The reason he’s working at this remote pension is that it was originally part of his rehabilitation to reintegrate into society, as the owner, Mr. Komori, had explained.

"Hey, Taro, stop bothering everyone."

Rin, who had a knack for looking after others, tried to pull Taro away. But her face soon turned pale.

"Huh? Hey, Uncle! T-This, isn’t this blood?"

"What?!"

Uncle Yamada crouched down by the door. Indeed, a thin stream of something that looked like red blood was flowing out.

The uncle dipped his finger into the red liquid and, without hesitation, brought it to his mouth.

"*Lick*. …No doubt about it, this is blood."

"This is bad! Mr. Yamada, we need to break the door down and get inside!"

The giant man with a butterfly tattoo, known as Mr. Chosato, who works as the pension’s cook, spoke up in a panic. Given his position, it was only natural that he was close to the owner, Mr. Komori. Of course, he’d be worried.

"Well, there’s no helping it. Alright, let’s break in. Mr. Chosato, help me out, let’s ram the door."

"Yes, understood!"

"Here we go, on three! One, two, three!"

With a dull thud, Uncle Yamada and Mr. Chosato slammed their shoulders into the door. The first hit only made the door shake a little, but after two or three more attempts, the shaking grew stronger, and on the fourth try, the hinges finally snapped off. Uncle Yamada stumbled forward from the momentum.

"Oooops… Ahh!? What the hell is this?!"

The uncle shouted. We all peeked into the room after him, and collectively gasped.

The floor was covered in a large pool of blood. And in the center of it, the owner of this pension "Chez Poul," Mr. Komori, lay in a grotesque state.

A large knife was sticking out of his left chest—

Thus began the terrifying Snowy Mountain Pension Locked-Room Murder Case.

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To all viewers, please note: this story is a work of fiction. It has no connection whatsoever to any real individuals or organizations. We repeat, this story is fictional—

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Now, I think it’s a good time to summarize the events so far.

First of all, my name is Iyoko Satsuki. I’m just your typical middle school girl who happens to be a bit obsessed with Mao Zedong and Lenin. By the way, what I hate are people who bring up the topic of the Cultural Revolution.

It all started three days ago, during winter break.

My friend Rin Yamada and I, with no particular plans to go anywhere, decided to make plans for a ski trip.

But being middle school students, we had the unfortunate reality that it wasn’t easy for us to take an overnight trip on our own. We didn’t have money, and there weren’t many lodging facilities that would let kids stay by themselves.

But friends are worth having. That’s when Rin’s connections came in handy. The Yamada family used to be involved in private investigation, so they had quite a network. Thanks to that, we were able to come to this remote pension called "Chez Poul," where Rin’s acquaintance, Mr. Komori, was the owner. Yes, the same Mr. Komori who was just found dead with a knife in his chest.

Uncle Yamada, or Kogoro Yamada, was our chaperone. After all, you can’t get to this place without a car. So, we asked Rin’s uncle, who always seemed to have free time, to guide us. Apparently, he’s a former police officer who now works as a food critic or a sommelier for smoked goods, going by the nickname "Smokey Kogoro." Maybe that’s why he didn’t hesitate to lick what was likely blood earlier.

Besides the murdered Mr. Komori, there were six people at Chez Poul that day, including Uncle Yamada, Rin, and me.

One of them was Mr. Chosato, the man who works as the cook here. He’s a big, burly man who fits the image of a mountain man more than a cook.

Then there’s Suzuki Taro, the aforementioned employee of the pension. As I mentioned before, while he’s physically an adult, he has an ingrained habit of pretending to be a child.

And finally, there’s the other guest, Ms. Histerie Isoyama. She’s affiliated with some volunteer organization and was the one who introduced Taro to this pension. This time, she came for a bit of rest and to check on how Taro was doing.

Looking back now, I often wonder why I didn’t notice the signs sooner.

The name "Chez Poul" just screamed "the kind of place where a murder might happen."

The fact that we were stuck in a snowstorm on a mountain, completely cut off from the outside world—a veritable island of land.

And the fact that we, strangers to one another, had all gathered here by chance.

It was inevitable that a murder would occur…!

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"O-Owner!"

"Don’t, Mr. Chosato! Don’t touch him! I’m sorry to say, but Mr. Komori is dead! We can’t disturb the crime scene!"

"Damn it..."

Uncle Yamada held back Mr. Chosato, who was about to rush into the room, then turned to us.

"Listen up, no one else is allowed to enter! I may not look it, but I’m a former police officer, so leave this to me."

Saying this, Uncle entered the room. He carefully avoided the blood and first touched Mr. Komori’s neck.

"No pulse. He’s definitely dead. And his body is already quite cold. That means he’s been dead for some time. Judging by the amount of blood, it’s likely he bled to death from a wound to his heart."

Next, the uncle looked around the room.

"The window is properly closed... and the door was locked. Could this be a suicide?"

"No way! The owner isn't the type to commit suicide!" Chosato, the cook, shouted. "Sure, he was always stressing about running this pension... but that's been the case for a long time. He wouldn't have done something so irresponsible with guests still here!"

"That may be what you think. But look at this room. The only ways in or out are the window and the door, both of which were locked. There's no sign of the window being broken. How else could you explain this other than suicide?"

"Well, I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Huh? Taro!? How did you sneak in here again?!"

When had he slipped in? There was Taro, crouched near the body, examining it.

"Hey, doesn't it seem a bit strange to call this a suicide? If it were, he could've just slit his wrists instead of stabbing himself in the heart, right? Also, take a look around the room."

At his words, we all looked around. Maybe we had been too focused on the body to notice until now, but the room looked as if a storm had blown through. Books were scattered everywhere, the clock had fallen, the lamp was toppled, and trash was strewn about.

"See? It's a mess, right? This is probably the result of Mr. Komori struggling with the perpetrator."

"Hmm. Now that you mention it..."

"Wait, wait a second!" Rin interrupted. "Are you saying that means the killer is hiding somewhere in this pension!?"

"Come to think of it, I saw something on the news yesterday," Isoyama said, as if suddenly remembering. "A death-row inmate escaped from a nearby prison..."

"What?! How timely!" I couldn't help but shout. "That reminds me, I also saw a news report about a KGB spy who killed Litvinenko in the UK recently entering the country!"

"But either way, I think the possibility of an outside perpetrator is pretty low."

Once again, Taro spoke with a smug look.

"What do you mean, Taro?"

"Well, there's a snowstorm outside, and we're deep in the mountains, right? There's no way a death-row convict could make it all the way here. Even if they somehow managed to get here, there's nowhere to hide in this small pension."

"That’s not necessarily true. This pension has a basement and storage rooms—there are plenty of places out of sight, aren’t there?"

Isoyama asked, but Taro didn’t seem fazed.

"This is a pension in a freezing mountain area, you know? If they hid somewhere without heating, they’d freeze to death. And if they stayed in the heated areas, someone would notice them."

"W-Wait a second, Taro..." Rin said anxiously. "Are you suggesting that the person who killed Mr. Komori is..."

"Yep! It’s someone here among us!"

The air froze.

Of course it did. The thought that one of us, sitting here talking, could be a murderer was something no one wanted to imagine.

"H-Hey, Taro?" Rin said, trying to scold him. "You shouldn’t say such unlucky things, even if you’re thinking them!"

"Sorry! But if no one could come from the outside, isn’t it most reasonable to assume someone from the inside did it?"

I wanted to slap him. Even if it's an obvious thought, you don’t say it unless you’re sure. He can play the child all he wants, but at least learn to read the room.

"T-That’s it!" Isoyama suddenly clapped her hands, as if remembering something. "We shouldn’t be sitting around like this! We need to call the police immediately!"

"It’s no use doing that!" Taro shouted again. "There’s a snowstorm outside and we’re in the middle of nowhere! The phone lines are probably down too, so there’s no way we can call the police!"

"Is that true?"

I took out my cellphone to check, but as expected, there was no signal. Well, that was predictable, given how deep into the mountains we were. Meanwhile, Isoyama picked up the

landline phone in the corridor and tried dialing, but just as Taro had said, it didn't connect. She weakly shook her head and put the receiver down.

"Well, this is a problem... I guess we'll have to drive to town and call the police."

Uncle Yamada rubbed his chin, deep in thought.

"You'd better not try it. Driving in this blizzard is suicide," said Chosato, the cook, with the sensible advice of a local. "We'll be fine. The blizzard should stop by tomorrow. We've got electricity thanks to the generator and plenty of food for situations like these. If we can just make it through today..."

If we can just make it through today—

That phrase brought us a small sense of relief.

But the next terror was already creeping closer.

"Huuuh? There's some suspicious powder here!"

It was him again. Taro pointed to the desk as he spoke.

On the desk was a small packet of medicine. Just as Taro had said, there was a suspicious-looking blue powder on it.

"You again! Stop messing with the crime scene, get out of the way!"

"Ouch!"

Uncle Yamada struck Taro with his fist.

"Damn it, always sneaking around... But what is this powder?"

Yamada rubbed a bit of the powder between his fingers, then, without hesitation, brought it to his mouth.

"*Lick*. Hmm, a sharp, tangy taste... This... this is cyanide—guh!?"

Blood, as red as ketchup, spewed from Uncle Yamada's mouth as he collapsed to the floor.

"Uncle!? Oh no! I smell almonds coming from his mouth!"

"You moroooon!"

Taro’s scream echoed through the room.

And so, the curtain rose on the terrifying "Snowy Mountain Pension Serial Murders."

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The scene changed, and now everyone had gathered in the living room.

Outside, the fierce wind howled, making it sound bitterly cold. But, as expected of a pension built in such a location, the cold didn’t reach us inside, thanks to the thorough insulation.

It had all started this morning.

The story itself isn’t complicated. It was just that Mr. Komori, the owner, hadn’t come out of his room, even though it was already morning.

This pension was run with a skeleton crew. Without the owner, Mr. Komori, even preparing meals would be difficult.

Worried, Chosato, the cook, went to Mr. Komori’s room and knocked on the door. But even though the door was locked from the inside, there was no response.

Just as Chosato was fretting over what to do, we came across him, heard the situation, and that led to everything that happened earlier.

"I can’t believe my uncle was killed too...!"

My friend Rin, sitting on the couch, said in a strained voice.

"Rin..."

I placed my hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her.

I had never heard that Rin and Uncle Yamada were particularly close. But even though he was just that "uncle," he was still her relative, and she was clearly crushed.

"The truth is... my uncle always had this bad habit of getting involved in murder cases wherever he went. I couldn’t even count how many times I wondered if he was some kind of living grim

reaper, and honestly, I've thought more than once that the world might be a bit more peaceful if he were dead. And besides, it was always me who ended up getting caught up in the messes! But even so, it's sad that he's still my uncle. I mean, if he at least left me an inheritance, that'd be something, but as a niece, I have no legal right to inherit anything! Honestly, he deserved a death like that!"

"...Oh, I see."

It seemed that Rin's grief was beyond normal. She appeared to be a little shaken.

"But—" Ms. Isoyama began to speak. "Mr. Yamada died because he licked that powder, right? I mean, doesn't that seem more like an accident or suicide rather than murder?"

"That's ridiculous, Ms. Isoyama! What are you talking about?! It was a trap set by the killer, who knew that my uncle was curious but lacked self-control! There's no other explanation!"

Rin's clenched fists trembled with fury.

"Even so, it's still hard to understand, isn't it?"

Seeing the strange looks everyone was giving Rin, I decided to step in and change the atmosphere.

"If we assume Mr. Komori didn't commit suicide, how was he killed? All the windows in his room were closed, and the door was locked, right? This is what you call a locked-room murder, isn't it?"

"Hmm, you're right," Ms. Isoyama tilted her head. "Mr. Chosato, is there a master key or something?"

"No... I've never heard of one."

"Really? But what about when guests lose their keys?"

"Well, sometimes that does happen... but in those cases, we usually forced the door open. Earlier too, the door opened pretty easily when we rammed it, didn't it? The doors here are rather fragile. The owner was good at DIY, so he could fix them himself right away."

"What? Ugh, so we're back to square one!"

I sighed and put my head in my hands, frustrated.

"Moron, it’s simple!"

It was the brat again.

"What do you mean, simple... Taro, how could you possibly know?"

"Well, sis Rin, the killer probably used string. First, the killer visited Mr. Komori’s room. The reason doesn’t matter—after all, he’s the owner of this pension. Whether it was a staff member or a guest, Mr. Komori would have let them in. Then, the killer stabbed Mr. Komori and left the room without drawing attention. Before leaving, the killer hooked a loop of string onto the lock. Once outside, they pulled the string hard, turning the lock with a click. After that, they just pulled the string hard enough to snap it and retrieve it. It’s a method you see all the time in detective novels, dramas, or manga!"

How blunt...!

That’s what I thought, but I kept my mouth shut.

"W-Wait a second, Taro," Rin asked thoughtfully. "If what you’re saying is true, then the killer must have known Mr. Komori, right?"

"Exactly. Which means, once again, the killer is one of us!"

One of us—again with that? This damn brat...

"So, we really are back to square one again..." Ms. Isoyama sighed. "Looks like the best thing we can do is stay here until morning and wait for the blizzard to pass before heading back to town."

"That’s not true! There’s still something we can do!"

"Something we can do? What do you mean?"

I asked, but instead of answering, Taro turned to Ms. Isoyama.

"Hey, Ms. Isoyama, where were you when the incident happened?"

"Huh? Where I was...? Ah, you’re asking me to prove my alibi, huh?"

I see. So, what we can do is try to identify the killer ourselves. It’s a simple and straightforward approach, but I had to admit, I was a little impressed. He may be playing the part of a kid, but his thinking is refreshingly direct.

"Well, this is a problem. I was in my room all morning, so I don’t have an alibi."

"Hmmm? That’s strange. I asked where you were when the incident happened, but how do you know when the incident took place?"

"Wha...?"

Ms. Isoyama’s face froze. Naturally, all our eyes turned toward her.

"W-Wait a minute! But if you say that, wouldn’t we all be in the same boat? I don’t know when Mr. Komori was killed, but I was alone in my room from last night until this morning, so I have no alibi, just like everyone else!"

"T-That’s true. It doesn’t prove Ms. Isoyama is the killer. I was alone in my room until morning too."

Mr. Chosato added in her defense, his words easing the tension in the room.

Rin nodded, adding,

"Yeah, that’s right. We were all sleeping until just a while ago, so it would be strange for anyone to have an alibi."

"But if that’s the case, aren’t we in the clear? After all, we were staying in a two-person room."

"Hmmm, I don’t think that’s necessarily the case. If someone were planning to kill Mr. Komori, wouldn’t it be more reliable to do it with two people rather than just one?"

Ugh, read the room, you damn brat...!

But he was right. It’s definitely more reliable to have two people work together rather than one, especially if they’re girls like us.

In other words, there’s only one conclusion: everyone here is still a potential suspect.

And so—once again, that heavy, oppressive atmosphere settled over the room, all thanks to a kid who couldn’t read the situation.

"This is pointless! There’s no use in us all suspecting each other like this!"

Suddenly, as if coming to a decision, Mr. Chosato stood up.

"Huh? What is it? Are you going to do something?"

I asked, and Mr. Chosato nodded firmly.

"After everything that's happened since this morning, everyone's on edge. This is where the cook comes in. I know no one's in the mood to eat after seeing a dead body, but if we at least have some nice tea and sweet snacks, it might help calm us down a bit."

That was a far more constructive suggestion than the nonsense coming from a certain someone who was only stirring up suspicion.

It was true. After all the chaos since this morning, none of us had eaten anything. I was getting hungry, and my throat felt parched from the dry air.

"Would anyone like coffee?"

"Oh, I'll have cocoa!"

Taro said without hesitation. Just shut up already. Aren't you supposed to be staff here?

"I'll help too. If I don't keep busy, I feel like I'll have a breakdown."

Ms. Isoyama said, following Mr. Chosato into the kitchen.

Soon after, five cups of drinks and a plate of cookies and fruit were brought to the table in the living room.

The rich aroma of coffee filled the air, and our stomachs, as if reminded of their emptiness, began to growl.

"Wait, what? There are three coffees, one cocoa... And what's this other one? It looks like hot water."

"Oh, that's mine. I'm more of a tea person."

With that, Ms. Isoyama dunked a tea bag into the hot water. The golden-brown tint of the tea began to seep into the water. Hmm, tea, huh? That might've been a better choice. I've never really liked coffee much. Whenever I drink it, my hands tend to shake, probably because of the caffeine.

But it felt rude to return the coffee after they'd gone to the trouble of preparing it. Reluctantly—or maybe that's too dramatic—but anyway, I decided to forget the small details and poured some gum syrup and milk into my coffee.

"Oh, this is delicious."

"Yeah, really."

Rin and I expressed the same thought at the same time. The coffee had a depth and richness unlike anything I'd tasted before.

"Mr. Komori, the owner, was really particular about coffee, you know. Apparently, this is said to be the best coffee in the world."

"Wow, really?"

I took a second sip.

"Yeah, apparently it's made with beans that are processed through a cat's digestive system."

"Bwuh!?"

"Hey, Iyoko!? That's disgusting!"

Rin wiped the coffee that had sprayed out with a napkin.

"S-Sorry, sorry. But Mr. Chosato, that was a pretty tasteless joke. Especially while we're eating."

"Oh, I don't think it's that bad," Ms. Isoyama replied. "Didn't you know? The world's best coffee is actually made from cat excrement. The beans eaten by the cat get tastier in its stomach."

"Wha—seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

Ms. Isoyama smiled with a kind of adult composure as she added sugar to her tea.

From her expression, it was impossible to tell if she was joking or being serious. On top of that, Ms. Isoyama had chosen tea instead of coffee. Should I take that to mean she avoided the coffee because it was made from cat dung?

Rin and I exchanged glances before looking down again at the coffee in front of us.

"It does taste good, but..."

"Yeah, right?"

Honestly, the idea that it was made from cat dung was off-putting.

Just as we were staring at the coffee with serious expressions—

Crash. Splash. Clatter, clatter, clatter.

The cup hit the floor and shattered, spilling the tea inside and sending the spoon rolling.

"Ugh!"

Suddenly, Ms. Isoyama dropped her cup.

"W-What's wrong, Ms. Isoyama?!"

Rin hurriedly called out to her.

"Uh... kuh... kuhkeh."

"Kuhkeh?"

"Kuhkehkehkehkehkehkehkehkeh!"

Ms. Isoyama clutched her throat, arched her back, and let out a deranged cackle.

The strangeness of it left us all frozen in place, staring dumbfounded.

And then, Ms. Isoyama's behavior grew even more bizarre—

Thud.

She collapsed, her body bent backward like a bow, eyes rolling back in her head.

"M-Ms. Isoyama? You're joking, right?"

Mr. Chosato cautiously approached the fallen Ms. Isoyama and tried to lift her up. But it was immediately clear that Ms. Isoyama's body had gone completely limp, like a puppet.

Mr. Chosato's face turned as pale as Ms. Isoyama's.

"No way..."

She gently placed her hand on Ms. Isoyama’s neck.

"This can’t be... There’s no pulse. And she’s... not breathing."

There was only one possible meaning behind those words.

"M-Ms. Isoyamaaaaaaaa!?"

Rin’s scream echoed through the room.

◆

"No way... I can’t believe Ms. Isoyama ended up like that too."

Even Rin couldn’t handle something like this. She was completely dejected.

Mr. Chosato had moved Ms. Isoyama’s body to one of the guest rooms. We couldn’t very well keep sitting in the same room with a corpse.

"It seems like someone must have poisoned her," I suggested. "Whether it was in the hot water or the cup, I’m not sure..."

"N-No, that’s impossible!" Mr. Chosato vehemently denied it. "We all used the same hot water, and no one knew which cup they’d get. Ms. Isoyama was the only one who used a tea bag, but that tea bag was brand new, sealed until just before she used it. There was no way to add poison!"

"Hmm, I see..."

I tilted my head in thought.

At the very least, there were too many things that didn’t make sense if we assumed someone had intentionally tried to kill only Ms. Isoyama.

"Why was Ms. Isoyama killed, I wonder?" Rin mused, tilting her head. "Could the killer have had a grudge against her and somehow managed to poison only her? Or was it random? Maybe they just poisoned one of the cups, hoping to kill anyone?"

"Hmm, I don’t know," Mr. Chosato said. "If the goal was to kill us all indiscriminately, the killer could’ve just poisoned the water and we’d all be dead by now. I don’t see the point of killing us one by one."

"Yeah, that’s true."

"Still, talking about it like this makes me feel like I’m the most suspicious one here, since I’m the one who suggested we have tea."

"N-No, that’s not true!"

Rin said brightly, but I could tell from her slightly strained voice that she wasn’t entirely convinced. In this situation, it wasn’t odd to suspect anyone of being the killer.

But then, as if to dispel our suspicions—

"That may not necessarily be the case."

It was Taro again. In his hand, he held a paper bag of some sort.

"Look at this. I found it in the kitchen."

"What is it?"

Rin took the paper bag from Taro and looked inside. I peeked in as well and saw it was filled with a large amount of powder, resembling sugar.

"This... is it sugar?"

"No, it’s not. Check the ingredients label on the back."

"Huh?"

Following his suggestion, Rin turned the bag around. The label read:

"What... what is this? ‘Strychnine 100%’...?"

"Wait, Rin! That’s a deadly poison, isn’t it!?"

"Huh, it is!?"

Startled, Rin tossed the bag onto the table, as if trying to get it away from her.

"S-So, does that mean... Ms. Isoyama drank this and died?"

"I’m sure of it! Strychnine is an extremely toxic alkaloid. It causes muscles to spasm uncontrollably. That’s why, if you ingest a lethal dose, you end up with a twisted expression like Ms. Isoyama’s and die from respiratory paralysis!"

The damn kid sounded almost gleeful. There are always people like this—those who love to show off their knowledge and take pleasure in it. And, predictably, they're the ones who can't read the room.

"Come to think of it," Rin said, picking up the sugar pot from the table. "Wasn't Ms. Isoyama the only one who added sugar earlier?"

"That's right. I used syrup, not sugar."

"I-I drank mine black."

"Yeah, and you wouldn't put syrup in tea... So, that means the sugar must've had the strychnine in it?"

The white powder in the sugar pot looked just like sugar, but now that it had been pointed out, it did seem a bit too fine to be regular sugar. Still, I wasn't about to taste it to find out. There was no way to be sure.

A heavy silence settled over the room, for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

We were all starting to suspect each other. It was the worst possible atmosphere. And this time, there was no escaping it. Who did this, and why?

In this case, it was clear that anyone who hadn't used the sugar could be the culprit. In other words, anyone still alive here could be the killer. Even Rin.

At this point, there was no way to move forward.

Locking ourselves alone in our rooms would only be more dangerous. Perhaps the safest option was to stay here, watching each other without eating or drinking anything. But that would be mentally exhausting. And eventually, someone would need to go to the bathroom, or the hunger would become unbearable.

Just then—

"Huh? Now that I think about it..."

Suddenly, Mr. Chosato spoke up, holding his head.

"What is it?"

"Well, I just realized something strange..."

Mr. Chosato said this and then fell silent again, holding his head as if in deep thought. He seemed to have remembered something.

"Y-Yes! That's it! I knew it!" He suddenly stood up, excited. "Wait here, everyone! I just remembered something important about the owner's body. I'll go check it out!"

"W-Wait, Mr. Chosato! It's dangerous to go off alone!"

"It's fine, it won't take long!"

Ignoring Rin's warning, Mr. Chosato left the room.

"What should we do? Mr. Chosato's gone. Isn't it dangerous for him to be alone if there really is a killer?"

"Don't worry, Rin. Mr. Chosato is the strongest among us. Besides, judging by how he was acting, maybe he's already figured out who the killer is."

"That's not it, Iyoko. You don't understand. What I'm trying to say is that Mr. Chosato's actions were the number one death flag in a snowed-in mountain lodge murder case!"

"Oh, I see."

Just as I was nodding in agreement at Rin's perfectly reasonable words—

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Mr. Chosato's scream echoed through the air.

◆

"What's going on anymore? What happened to Mr. Chosato…?"

Rin was close to tears. I was trying to calm her down by patting her back, but given the situation, it didn't seem to be working.

After we heard Mr. Chosato's scream, the three of us—Rin, Taro, and I—immediately rushed toward the sound.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly where the scream came from because of the way the sound echoed inside the lodge, but once we had a sense of the direction, finding the place wasn't too difficult.

The first and second murder scene—specifically, Mr. Komori's room. It seemed like Mr. Chosato's scream had come from the room where Mr. Komori and Uncle Yamada's bodies still lay.

However, we couldn't be sure. Because from that point on, we never saw Mr. Chosato again. But there was one thing that served as evidence: a new bloodstain that hadn't been there before was now present in Mr. Komori's room.

That's right. Mr. Chosato vanished, and in his place, we found a fresh bloodstain—so much blood that it might have been fatal.

Of course, it wasn't from Mr. Komori, who had been stabbed in the heart. But whether or not it was Mr. Chosato's blood, we couldn't tell.

However, based on how wet the blood was, it was clear that the stain had appeared just moments before we arrived. Only a few dozen seconds had passed since we heard the scream. And in that brief time, Mr. Chosato had vanished without a trace, leaving behind an unidentified pool of blood.

"What's going on? Was there really a murderer hiding somewhere, and did they kill Mr. Chosato and take his body away?"

"Calm down, Rin. There's no way something like that is happening. It's okay."

"How can you be so sure?! There's no other way to explain it!"

This wasn't working. Rin was completely losing it.

But then—

"...I see. I understand now. So that's what's going on."

Suddenly, Taro muttered something strange in an oddly serious tone.

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just going to the bathroom for a bit!"

"Wait, Taro?"

Before I could stop him, he dashed out of the room. I couldn't just leave Rin behind to chase after him, so I had no choice but to stay and wait.

But then—

I heard a *whoosh*, like something slicing through the air. No, maybe it was more accurate to say something had been fired.

And right after that—

"...Huh? Suddenly, I feel... really sleepy... *thud*."

Rin collapsed just like that.

It was as if a needle had flown and hit a pressure point, sending her into instant sleep. She slumped back against the sofa, her neck hanging limply.

"Wait… Rin!?"

And then—

'Iyoko. I've figured it out. I've solved all the mysteries.'

"Huh?"

It was Rin's voice.

But something was strange. It was definitely her voice, but the direction it was coming from was odd. It sounded like it was coming from the hallway, the same way Taro had gone... And Rin's mouth clearly wasn't moving.

'Hey, Iyoko. I want you to remember something.'

"W-What?"

'Remember the first incident, when we found Mr. Komori's body. Who was the one who confirmed that Mr. Komori was dead?'

"Huh? Um, if I remember correctly... Wasn't it Uncle Yamada? He told everyone not to come in the room, but then said he used to be a police officer and started checking the body himself..."

'That's right. So what about when your uncle licked the cyanide and died?'

"...Um, come to think of it, no one really confirmed that, did they?"

'Exactly. When your uncle collapsed after claiming he'd ingested cyanide and then vomiting blood, we all just assumed he was dead. We kids were immediately kicked out of the room. And that's not all. When Ms. Hysterie Isoyama drank the tea laced with strychnine and died, it was Mr. Chosato who confirmed it. And now, we don't even know where Mr. Chosato is. There was a pool of what looked like blood in Mr. Komori's room, but we never saw a body. In other words, there's only one conclusion.'

"...We haven't actually confirmed any of the bodies ourselves, have we?"

'Exactly. Every time, it was someone other than you, me, or Taro who checked if they were dead. In other words, none of us have actually seen a dead body with our own eyes.'

"Hmm, now that you mention it, that might be true. But wasn't it just that they were trying to protect us kids from seeing the bodies? And besides, Mr. Komori had a knife sticking out of his heart. He looked dead to me."

'That's where you're wrong, Iyoko. You see, the human heart is protected by the ribs, the pectoral muscles, and the pericardium. It's much tougher than what we see in dramas and anime. It's impossible for an amateur or a woman or child to break through the ribs and stab the heart like that. Mr. Komori also had signs of resisting. And there's one more thing. The heart is a pump that circulates blood through the body. If that pump is damaged, it can't send blood anymore. In other words, if the heart is stabbed, there's no way there would be that much bleeding. The blood flow would stop, so there wouldn't be any bleeding at all, right?'

"But, but there was a huge pool of blood, wasn't there!?"

'That's right. But Mr. Komori wasn't dead. He just had a trick knife with a retractable blade pressed against his chest. They probably just splattered some red paint around.'

"I... I think I'm starting to get what you're saying. So what about Uncle Yamada?"

'The same thing. You see, when you ingest cyanide orally, it reacts with the stomach acid to produce cyanide gas. The gas is absorbed through the mucous membranes, preventing the blood from absorbing oxygen, similar to carbon monoxide poisoning, and that's what kills you. But that's all cyanide does. Think about what happened when Mr. Yamada died. He vomited blood like ketchup, right? But for someone to vomit blood, their respiratory system or digestive tract would have to be damaged. Cyanide doesn't cause that.'

"So... Uncle Yamada didn't lick cyanide at all?"

'Exactly. And the blood he vomited was probably just ketchup.'

"Then what about Ms. Isoyama, who supposedly died after drinking the tea?"

'That’s the same as well. Strychnine is incredibly bitter—so bitter it’s shocking. Unless it was wrapped in something like an oblate, if a liquid containing a lethal dose of strychnine touched your tongue, you’d spit it out immediately. There’s no way you could ingest enough of it to be fatal. Plus, strychnine takes about 30 minutes to take effect. But Ms. Isoyama collapsed right after drinking the tea. In other words, that was all an act.'

"I see. And as for Mr. Chosato, he just disappeared without us finding a body... I understand what you’re saying now, Rin. So, this whole string of murders is…"

'Exactly. No one has actually died. This is just an elaborate prank set up by the adults to scare us!'

"W-What?!"

I exaggerated my surprise on purpose.

"So, all the adults are probably..."

'Yes, that’s right. They’re probably watching us struggle somewhere and enjoying themselves. Look, there’s a blizzard, and we can’t even go outside today, can we? They must have thought of this as some kind of recreational activity to kill time.'

Here, Rin paused for a moment.

As if giving the audience time to mentally prepare themselves.

'Isn’t that right, Uncle Yamada!?'

She shouted confidently and loudly.

And right after that—

"Pfft."

A small snicker.

"Ahahahaha!"

The sound of uncontrollable laughter echoed around us.

However, the laughter didn’t belong to an adult. It was a child’s laugh, and a girl’s at that. Which made sense, because that laugh—

Was coming from *my* mouth.

'W-Wait, what's so funny, Iyoko? Why did you suddenly start laughing?'

"Hahaha! I can't help but laugh! Oh, it's fine, Taro. I don't know if you're shy or what, but I know you've been speaking for Rin using that microphone. Just come out already, and I'll tell you why I'm laughing. And by the way, your reasoning is completely off. Even if you stay quiet, the adults aren't going to come out."

"..."

Perhaps resigned, Taro's enormous frame appeared from the hallway.

"What do you mean by that? You're going to tell me now, right, sis Iyoko?"

There was no trace of childishness left in his eyes. They were sharp. Yes, if he didn't bother pretending to be a child, he could actually be pretty useful. It was worth setting up everything to test him this far.

"Yes, I'll tell you. You're wrong, you've misunderstood. Yes, the first victim, Mr. Komori, was stabbed in the chest and died. But that wasn't a trick or anything. If the killer is a professional, stabbing through the ribs and pectoral muscles to the heart with a knife isn't all that difficult. And one more thing, the knife didn't actually pierce the heart. Sure, if you stab the heart, which acts like a pump, there's no reason for there to be much bleeding. But, if you sever one of the large arteries connected to the heart, it's fine. The heart keeps pumping, spraying blood out from the severed artery. Of course, it's not surprising that you got it wrong, since there's no way an amateur could cut something like that so cleanly."

"..."

"And the same goes for Uncle Yamada's death. Yes, it's true that the powder wasn't cyanide. That was potassium cyanide-fujimis, a new kind of deadly poison that our organization developed. Even one milligram taken orally is enough to create a strong chemical reaction when mixed with stomach acid, quickly liquefying the entire digestive system. The person who ingests it will vomit blood and die instantly. Of course, we already knew that Uncle Yamada had the habit of licking anything suspicious to check it. As for the blood that looked like ketchup? That's just how it appeared after mixing with the stomach's mucus."

"N-No way… Then what about Ms. Hysterie Isoyama!?"

"That’s the same. But the drug she was given wasn’t just regular strychnine. It was something our organization developed—Super Strychnine. It overcame the old strychnine’s weaknesses of bitterness and slow effectiveness. It’s literally Super Strychnine."

"That’s ridiculous!"

"Oh my, 'ridiculous' is a bit harsh, isn’t it? The fact is, Ms. Isoyama died right away, didn’t she? Didn’t some famous person say to accept everything you see as reality? Also, yes, it was Ms. Isoyama who used sugar. But remember, I used gum syrup in my coffee. It’s unusual to put gum syrup in hot coffee, don’t you think? Unless it’s iced coffee, that is."

"Then what about Mr. Chosato!? Where is Mr. Chosato right now!?"

"Who knows? I just said to take care of him if the opportunity arose. By now, he’s probably frozen somewhere in the snow. Maybe he’ll thaw out when spring comes around."

"No way, I can’t believe it! W-Who are you!? Why would you do something like this!? What’s your motive!?"

I let out a small laugh.

"Suzuki Taro. I never thought I’d find you in a place like this. Very well, I’ll tell you the motive first. The reason is *you*, Taro. I tracked you down to this remote lodge and came all the way here to bring you back to our organization…!"

"Wha—"

At the word "organization," Taro’s expression twisted in fear.

"In order to secretly take you out of the country, I had to eliminate anyone who knew about you. In other words, the staff here at the lodge. That’s why I killed them. That’s the story."

"M-Ms. Isoyama had nothing to do with this! She wasn’t involved!"

"Wrong. She was your protective handler. If you suddenly disappeared, she would have gotten suspicious, wouldn’t she? I had no choice but to get rid of her. Also, you probably didn’t know this, but the one who kidnapped you from our organization and put you under protection was Isoyama. She was a public security spy, codenamed 'Awry Sprightly.' She had the flaw of hysteria, which is why she’s retired now."

"A-Awry Sprightly? Why sprightly? And isn’t 'awry' a bad thing?"

"Oh, don’t you get it? It’s a pun on 'spy' and 'spry' and 'awry.'"

"…Oh, I see. But then, why did you kill Uncle Yamada!?"

"Ah, Rin's uncle? He's famous for causing murder cases wherever he goes. Rin always ends up getting involved in them, too. I just thought I'd put him out of his misery because I felt sorry for her."

"Just for something like that…?"

"Yes, just for something like that. The instant-acting wristwatch stun gun you created, the tie-voice-changer that can perfectly mimic anyone's voice… None of these things can be made with modern technology. If we could mass-produce them, they would be incredibly useful to our organization. Killing four or five people for that is a small price to pay. Oh, one thing I should thank you for—thanks for putting Rin to sleep. She's my friend, so I didn't have to kill her. I'll have to hypnotize her later, but you've saved me some trouble there."

"This… this can't be happening…"

Taro looked terrified, like a mouse cornered by a cat.

Watching him like that, I felt my sadistic tendencies being satisfied as I snapped my fingers.

At the same time, several figures in camouflage gear descended from the ceiling.

"Now. Take him away, comrades of the KGB!"

"'Yes, sir'!"

For some reason, the Russian operatives responded in English before all pouncing on Taro at once.

There was no stopping them, the KGB's legendary agents, said to be the strongest in the world.

"U-Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Suzuki Taro's scream echoed throughout the snow-covered lodge.

At the same time, the lights slowly dimmed—

And the curtain fell.

◆

'And that concludes the play "Detective Taro" by Class 2-B. Please give them a big round of applause!'

Clap, clap, clap, clap…

Thunderous applause echoed throughout the gymnasium.

I clapped as hard as I could, then turned excitedly to the teacher beside me.

"Wow, Satsuki was absolutely perfect as Iyoko, don’t you think, Mr. Yamashika?"

"…Isn’t this a bit inappropriate? Like, from a common-sense perspective…"

(Night of the Little Ones -- End)

はじめてのさいばん
〜一日でできる
裁判編〜

My First Trial: The One-Day Trial Edition

The trigger for the incident—or rather, its beginning—was such a trivial conversation.

"Did you know, Mr. Yamashika? Thanks to that health program on TV, it seems that natto is now in short supply everywhere, and it’s causing all kinds of trouble."

That day, I was completely bored of the usual routine of cleaning, so I tried to change the atmosphere a little by bringing up a topic in line with current trends.

But, as always, Mr. Yamashika responded half-heartedly, with a newspaper in one hand.

"Well, I don't really care. I don’t even eat natto."

"What a waste! Even setting aside its diet benefits, natto is great for your health. If you have natto, eggs, and rice, you’ve got the perfect energy boost for the morning!"

"I’m more of a bread-for-breakfast guy."

"Wow, way to kill the conversation. But thanks to this whole natto frenzy, you can’t find any at the supermarket these days, and it’s getting pretty inconvenient. I never imagined that one TV show could make natto disappear from the shelves. Seriously, who’s pulling the strings behind the scenes?"

"..."

Without a word, the teacher lowered the newspaper with a rustling sound. From behind it, a demonic expression emerged.

"I’m sorry, I apologize, it was my fault, I won’t do it again."

I was a fool for trying to add a Kansai-style punchline just because we were talking about natto.

It was an awkward afternoon.

The phone suddenly rang. To someone like me, who was desperately looking for an escape, it was an extremely welcome distraction. I hurried to pick up the receiver.

"Hello, this is Yamashika Law Office."

'Excuse me, my name is Sachiusu, and I’d like to request a legal consultation…'

It sounded like the voice of a young man. Actually, it might even be more accurate to describe it as a boy's voice. Then again, the tone was polite and composed, so it didn't seem like a child.

"Oh, I see. Well, in that case, you'll need to come to our office. Would that be alright?"

'Yes, that's fine. I know the location.'

"Do you have a preferred time?"

'If possible, I'd like it to be soon. How about 1:30 this afternoon?'

"Let me confirm that. Please hold for a moment."

1:30, huh? That's only thirty minutes from now. He must be in a hurry, or maybe he's a salaryman trying to use his lunch break.

I covered the receiver and turned towards Mr. Yamashika.

"Sir, there's someone who urgently needs legal consultation."

"Oh? Well, we don't have much going on today anyway. Legal consultations are easy money—"

At that moment, I closed off my heart and blocked out the rest of his words. No lawyer in the world would ever think that just sitting through a 30-minute consultation to easily earn 30 dollars was a reasonable way to think. No, such lawyers don't exist.

"Are you listening, Isshaku? I said you can call them in right now."

"Oh, yes. My name is Kamatsuka. Understood."

I picked up the receiver again.

"Thank you for waiting. Yes, that's fine. We can accommodate your request, so feel free to come by anytime."

"Thank you. I'll be there at 1:30 then."

"Alright, we'll be expecting you. See you soon."

After I hung up, I came to a realization.

I'm a law apprentice, so why am I doing secretary-like tasks?

I thought this might actually be illegal unpaid labor, but then again, I figured it was better than just standing around cleaning all day. I guess I’m a naturally positive thinker.

And exactly thirty minutes later, the client showed up.

"Excuse me."

The client, who had introduced himself as Sachiusu, was probably around twenty years old, about the same age as me, and seemed slightly younger than Mr. Yamashika… or so I thought. I say "thought" because, in actuality, his face was so youthful that he could have easily passed for a high school student. But since he was wearing a suit, had made an appointment, and come for legal consultation, I didn’t think he was a student.

As soon as the client saw Mr. Yamashika sitting at his desk, he raised his voice.

"Mr. Yamashika! Long time no see!"

"Sachiusu!? Is that really you, Sachiusu!"

It was obvious from their conversation that they knew each other.

"…You two know each other, sir?"

"Yeah. He’s a junior from my high school days."

"Nice to meet you, I’m Sachiusu. Oh, and here, if you’d like…"

With that, Sachiusu handed me his business card.

"Ah, thank you very much. How polite of you."

The card read:

Dekoboko Trading Co., Ltd.

Planning and Production Department, Dotubo Sachiusu

"D-Dotubo... Sachiusu?"

What can I say, his name, "Sachiusu" written as "unlucky", was completely at odds with his cute appearance.

At the same time, it was a name that somehow made too much sense. He did seem to give off an air of misfortune. You could almost feel a protective instinct, or motherly affection, welling up. It’s a bad example, but if he appeared in a women’s fan comic, he’d definitely be the one who gets "taken," not the one "taking."

"So, Sachiusu, you’ve got a job now?"

Mr. Yamashika asked.

"Yes, somehow. I just joined this spring."

"Alright, have a seat. So, if you’re here for a legal consultation, I assume you’ve run into some trouble? Isshaku, go get us some tea."

"Yes, sir."

I was once again being put to work like a secretary. Well, since a guest had arrived, I guess it’s only natural to accept the task of fetching tea if I’m the one with free time.

I consoled myself with that thought as I brought the tea.

"So, Mr. Yamashika, do you know about JST?"

"No, never heard of it."

"Really, you don’t know, sir?" I cut in. "It’s a trendy chain restaurant that specializes in healthy tofu dishes. It stands for Japan Super Tofu."

Mr. Yamashika’s expression twisted slightly.

"T-Tofu?"

"Yes, tofu! It's just as much a health food as natto. JST is famous for offering low-calorie, healthy set meals for young people, where they replace the rice in dishes like beef bowls or pork cutlet bowls with tofu. And tofu contains something called 'tofukinase,' which, with its negative-ion properties, makes your blood flow smoother and is perfect for dieting!"

"…That sales pitch sounds like complete nonsense. 'Tofukinase'? Just slapping a difficult-sounding word on something doesn’t make it healthy. And replacing rice with tofu in beef bowls and pork cutlet bowls? That doesn’t automatically make it healthy."

"No, Mr. Yamashika," Sachiusu corrected him. "It’s not 'healthy,' it’s 'health-*ee*.' If you’re still pronouncing it like that, people will think you’re an old man."

Mr. Yamashika pursed his lips. He seemed a bit hurt.

"…So, what about this JST?"

"Yes. Actually, I recently ate at one of their restaurants, and it seems like I ended up with food poisoning."

"That’s some bad luck."

Perhaps out of some small sense of compassion, Mr. Yamashika didn’t add "just like your name."

"It wasn’t just bad luck! It was awful! I went through hell because of it!"

"Well, let’s start by hearing the full story."

"Alright. It was just about half a month ago, on a Saturday…"

And so, Sachiusu began his monologue.

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It was just about half a month ago, on a Saturday. That day, I went to JST for dinner because they were having a half-price sale on tofu set meals.

But that was the start of my misfortune.

It was the next evening when it happened—I suddenly had a severe stomach ache. At first, I didn’t think much of it since I tend to have a weak stomach. I figured I’d just take some antidiarrheal and it would go away soon enough. But then, when Monday came around, my stomach was still in terrible shape, so I had no choice but to take the day off from work and rest.

As the evening approached, I started to feel feverish, as if I’d caught a cold, on top of the diarrhea. At the time, I still wasn’t too worried. I thought maybe the cold virus had spread from my stomach to the rest of my body. That night, my fever went up, and I suffered through it, but perhaps sweating it out helped because when I woke up the next morning, I felt noticeably better. My fever had gone down. However, my stomach was still in bad shape, so I decided to take another day off work to see how things went.

But then.

By Tuesday night, my stomach hadn’t gotten any better. In fact, it got worse. Every thirty minutes, I was hit with sharp stomach pains that sent me rushing to the bathroom. Even though I hadn’t eaten anything and my stomach should have been empty, the number of trips to the bathroom didn’t decrease at all.

Since this condition continued into the next day, I started to think, “Maybe this isn’t just a cold.” So, since I had time on my hands, I decided to research "food poisoning" on the internet.

And there it was. A perfect match for my symptoms.

The name: Vibrio parahaemolyticus. Incubation period: 12 to 24 hours. Symptoms: diarrhea, stabbing stomach pains, fever. I had eaten tofu at JST on Saturday night, and my symptoms started on Sunday evening. The symptoms were an exact match.

To be honest, I got pretty angry. If the reason I hadn't been able to sleep properly for days was due to the restaurant’s unsanitary conditions, I couldn’t just let that go.

So, finally, on Thursday, I rushed to the hospital.

After going through the usual routine—questions, a physical exam, and a series of tests—the doctor said there was a possibility it was food poisoning. That’s when I asked him:

“Is there any way to prove that these symptoms are caused by food poisoning?”

The doctor replied:

“Well… did anyone else who ate with you have the same symptoms?”

“No… I went there alone.”

“Then it’s going to be a bit difficult.”

But I couldn't just give up that easily.

“B-But, isn't there a way to find out through testing? Like a stool test or something?”

“Well, it’s possible. Do you want to try?”

“Yes, please.”

“Alright, then please wait outside. We’ll call you in a bit.”

Ten minutes later, a nurse called my name.

“Mr. Sachiusu? Please come this way.”

I had already resigned myself to what was coming. I figured that to test for food poisoning, I’d have to provide a stool sample. With the mindset of a fish on the chopping block, I followed the nurse’s lead… to a bathroom.

…Or so I thought.

It wasn’t. It was a regular hospital room with a bed. No bathroom in sight, of course.

At that moment, a terrible thought crossed my mind. Could it be… a bedpan?

But the nurse said:

“Could you lie on your left side on the bed? We’ll collect the sample with a cotton swab.”

…It turned out they just needed a cotton swab.

Of course, I had my reservations. Fortunately or unfortunately, the nurse was a man.

But they’re professionals, and hesitating here would only make things more embarrassing.

So yes, I went through with it.

But think about it. After days of diarrhea, that area had become incredibly sensitive.

Then,

“Alright, please turn over. Now, curl up like a baby… yes, just like that. Okay, here we go…”

It went in.

Just like that.

◆

“I… I lost something precious that day. JST is unforgivable!”

Sachiusu clenched his fists, trembling, as if holding back tears, staring up at the ceiling.

Hearing this, Teacher’s face twitched slightly.

“Wasn’t that a necessary test though? You can’t really complain about it.”

“But it was JST that caused the problem in the first place! And besides, what if that test awakened something strange in me? I have a girlfriend, you know!?”

“…Wait, you have a girlfriend? You’re getting ahead of yourself, junior.”

“You could easily get one too, senior! You’re a lawyer, after all. But that’s not the point right now! What I’m trying to say is that this isn't just about the mental damage! Because of this food poisoning, I couldn’t go to work for a whole week! I’ve been with the company for less than six months, so I don’t have any paid leave yet. My salary took a huge hit because of those days off!”

“Ah, yeah, that sounds tough.”

Unusually, Teacher nodded in agreement. I had to agree too. Unexpected expenses right after a major life change can be a real burden.

“Right, isn’t it? I can manage this month by dipping into my savings, but at this rate, I’ll be completely broke by next month. I might have to borrow a bit from a loan company. I even ended up grabbing this flyer.”

As he said this, Sachiusu pulled out a piece of paper.

“What’s that? A loan company flyer?”

“Yeah, they were handing these out near the station.”

But as soon as Teacher saw it, his face twisted as if he had just bitten into something sour.

“…Ugh.”

What could possibly be on that flyer? Curious, I peeked over at it.

“A ‘Relaxed Loan’ from Snowman Finance…?”

That’s… not a great name. From any reasonable standpoint.

“Hey, Sachiusu, even if you do need to borrow money, stay away from this place. If you borrow from them, it’s not going to be funny.”

“I don’t want to borrow from anyone either, but what choice do I have?”

“That’s not the issue here…”

“Anyway! If you could just get some compensation from JST, senior, that would really help me out!”

“Ah, so that’s what this is about. Okay, I get it. By the way, how did the tests turn out?”

At that, Sachiusu produced a tea-colored envelope with a flourish.

“Ah, I got the results right here! The test confirmed a positive result for Vibrio parahaemolyticus! This is the doctor’s diagnosis!”

“If you have that, it should be straightforward. You could just take this to JST and explain the situation. A restaurant, especially a nationwide chain, should be able to handle something like this properly.”

“Of course I did! I went and told them! But do you know what they said? They told me that unless I can prove a direct link between their food and my food poisoning, they won’t pay a single cent!”

That’s awful. Of course, in civil cases, the burden of proof is on the plaintiff…

“But don’t they have a point? It’s not like you eat all your meals at JST, right? There’s a possibility that something else you ate caused it.”

“There’s no way! I ate at JST on Saturday night, and I didn’t eat anything else until Sunday lunchtime because I slept in! The incubation period for Vibrio parahaemolyticus is 12 to 24 hours! My symptoms started Sunday evening, so it has to be from Saturday night! There’s no doubt about it!”

I see. Given that timeline, it’s hard to rule out the connection entirely.

Mr. Yamashika seemed to think the same, crossing his arms and legs and nodding with a “hmm.”

“If JST still denies responsibility, I guess you’ll have no choice but to hire a lawyer or file a lawsuit. But Sachiusu, I have a couple of things to tell you.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“First, I specialize in criminal law, not civil cases. So I can’t take on this type of case.”

“Whaaaat!? You’re kidding me, senior!”

“Lawyers have their specialties, you know. And second, even if I were to take this case, do you know how much it costs to hire a lawyer?”

“…Uh.” Sachiusu blinked, his face blank. “H-How much?”

"Well, if we're talking about half a month's salary plus a bit of compensation for emotional distress, the most you could ask for would be around 3000 dollars. So the upfront fee would be about 300 dollars."

"Huh?"

At this point, Sachiusu's face had already started to twitch.

"Then there are the actual expenses. If hiring a lawyer scares them into settling, that’s great. But if it doesn’t end there and goes to court, it’ll get even more expensive. You’ll need to pay stamp duties to the court, document preparation costs, copying fees, and transportation to the courthouse. That’s several hundreds of dollars more. Even if you manage to get 3000 dollars, about 10% will go to the success fee, so that’s another 500 dollars deducted. Even if that’s paid after the fact, you’ll still need to front at least 300 dollars for the retainer fee. Do you have that kind of money?"

"Of course I don’t! I don't have money, which is why I’m trying to go to court to get it back!"

It was no surprise that Sachiusu was furious. This is a typical example of how the legal system never feels accessible to the average person and rarely works in favor of the underdog. It’s sad, but this is reality.

"So, you don’t have the money. Unfortunately, lawyers aren’t running charity services. Sorry, but you'll have to give up.”

“W-Wait, please! Can’t you do something for the sake of old times…?”

“I don’t think it’s right to trade on old times for money,” Teacher said, in a way that was so unlike him. “But if you still want to go ahead, you should try another lawyer. At the very least, I’m not taking the case. And by the way, can you even afford to pay me for this legal consultation? It’s 30 dollars for thirty minutes, you know?”

“Eeeeeeeh!? That’s outrageous, senior! Can’t you at least do me this one favor for the sake of old times?”

“You idiot. It’s called ‘courtesy, even among close friends.’ You’re not telling me you don’t even have 30 dollars to pay me with, are you?”

“…”

In silence, Sachiusu opened his wallet.

There were a few scraps of paper. Not bills. Receipts and coupons.

Seeing that, Mr. Yamashika let out a long sigh.

“Well, I’m done here.”

“W-Wait, hold on a minute!”

Clinging to Mr. Yamashika’s leg as he tried to stand up, Sachiusu pleaded.

“Let go, you pauper. I’m a lawyer running a business here. I have nothing to say to someone who can’t pay."

“Ahhh, you’re always like this! You’ve never changed! Please, just a little more advice!”

But the teacher, clearly uninterested, merely shook his leg to free himself. It was an attitude unbecoming of a lawyer.

“Look, if you want free legal aid or something, go find someone else. If you search enough, I’m sure there’s a lawyer out there desperate for work. Hmm… a lawyer desperate for work?”

But just as he said that, Mr. Yamashika seemed to remember something and added:

“Oh, right. Sachiusu, there’s one person who might help you.”

“R-Really? Even if I don’t have money?”

“Yeah. But I can’t vouch for her abilities. She knows a bit about the law, but she’s not a licensed lawyer. Well, you get what you pay for.”

At that moment—it goes without saying that a bad feeling ran through my mind.

“That’s fine! At this point, I just need someone with expertise!”

And so, Mr. Yamashika grinned as he turned around.

At me.

“Hey, Isshaku. It’s your time to shine.”

…Fine. I had already prepared myself for this.

◆

In the end, one minute later, I was the one sitting in the chair where Mr. Yamashika had been seated a moment ago. As for the teacher, he had lost interest and was now back in his usual spot, reading the newspaper absentmindedly.

“...So, um,”

“Yes! Please, just tell me anything that can help!”

Sachiusu looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes, sparkling with hope. Ugh, I’m a bit weak to this sort of thing. I ended up feeling like I had to do whatever I could to help.

“Well, what Mr. Yamashika said is true. If you hire a lawyer, most companies will get scared and settle, but there’s no doubt that hiring a lawyer will cost you quite a bit.”

“I-Is that so…? Then is there any way to negotiate without hiring a lawyer? Some kind of trick?”

“Hmm. Well, to be honest, it’s possible to represent yourself in a civil lawsuit without hiring a lawyer.”

“Is it really!?”

Sachiusu’s face lit up with joy.

“Yes, technically. But it’s really a huge hassle. The court will guide you through the procedures, but preparing the necessary documents in the proper format is a pain. And if things go badly, the case could drag on for a year. It’s not something you can just handle in your spare time if you’re working.”

“I see... I can’t afford to let this affect my work any more than it already has…”

Sachiusu slumped, clearly disappointed.

Watching him like that, I couldn’t help but feel like I couldn’t just leave him hanging. It’s strange how that feeling comes over you. I guess that’s what compassion is.

And then.

Whether it was because of that sense of pity or not, I suddenly remembered a certain system.

“Oh, wait. There is one good option. You could lower the amount you’re asking for and file for a small claims lawsuit.”

“...What’s that?”

“If the amount you’re asking for is less than 2000 dollars, there’s a system for that. Think of it as a simplified version of a civil trial. The fees are about 1% of the claim.”

So, I started explaining the details of small claims court to Sachiusu.

Small claims court is, as the name suggests, a court that handles disputes involving small amounts of money. It has two main characteristics:

1. It can only be used for claims involving less than 2000 dollars.

2. As a rule, a judgment will be handed down in one day.

Just one day. Compared to a regular civil trial, which can easily take a year, you can see how fast this process is.

There are other differences too, like how evidence is handled, or the fact that you can’t use it more than ten times a year. But those details aren’t important right now.

“I see. So I can do this by myself, right?”

“Yes. The system was created so that regular people could easily use the courts. I can help you with things like how to fill out the paperwork and the procedures. Honestly, for a small claims case, it’s cheaper to hire a judicial scrivener than a—ouch!”

I felt a sharp pain in my head and turned around.

…For some reason, Mr. Yamashika was standing behind me, arms crossed like a king.

“What do you think you’re doing, teacher!?”

“You were about to say something you shouldn’t. As someone who works at a law office and is aiming to become a lawyer, you should never mention judicial scriveners! That's like wearing a Manchester United shirt in the Kop at Anfield when Liverpool are playing!”

Wow, that’s quite the discriminatory statement. Lawyers and judicial scriveners should be able to share their work. That’s why people always say the legal profession is too exclusive!

…Well, I wanted to argue back, but I’ve learned a bit about getting by in life. My new motto is “Go with the flow.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, teacher.”

“Good. As long as you understand.”

Still, how on earth did the teacher, who had been sitting there reading a newspaper, move over here in an instant? Well, knowing him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he could teleport.

I quickly turned back to face Sachiusu.

“Anyway, with small claims, it costs almost nothing, and it’s still a court case. If you show JST that you’re serious, they’ll probably offer a settlement or something.”

“I see, I understand now. It seems like that’s my best option. Could you teach me how to do it?”

“Sure, no problem at all.”

...And so, Sachiusu left after learning the ins and outs of small claims court from me, feeling all fired up. He put the 30 dollars consultation fee on a tab.

Well, if JST were actually sued, they'd definitely offer a settlement before things escalated. So even I didn't doubt that things would turn out just as Sachiusu hoped at that point.

But, as with most of the cases that come to this law office...

Sachiusu's case was not one that would be resolved so easily.

◆

It was about a month after Sachiusu had come in.

During this time, Sachiusu had been exchanging documents such as written replies with the court, based on my advice.

And today had finally arrived. Today was the day of the trial. At this point, all I could do was pray that Sachiusu would manage somehow.

Which is why—I was surprised when the phone rang just after noon.

"Hello, Yamashika Law Office."

"Oh, hello!? It's Sachiusu! Is Mr. Yamashika there!?"

I almost jumped. It was Sachiusu. And judging by his voice, something was definitely wrong.

"Calm down, the teacher's in the restroom, but he'll be back soon. You sound awfully flustered, though. What happened?"

"It looks like I'm going to need my senior's help after all! I'm at the courthouse today, but something weird is happening! The people from JST brought a whole team—lawyers, food poisoning experts, and all—and just now, their lawyer threatened me, saying I should withdraw the lawsuit because I don't stand a chance!"

"Whaaaat!?"

I was shocked for two reasons.

First, that JST had no intention of settling.

Second, why in the world they'd bring experts to a small claims case against a regular citizen. I could understand bringing a lawyer, but hiring experts like that could easily cost close to 2000 dollars just for their appearance.

"I see, so you're saying you need Teacher's help. I'm sure he could handle a situation like that, but are you sure this is okay? After all, the reason he dumped this case on me a month ago was because you couldn't pay. If you want him to come to the courthouse, you'll need to offer him something substantial..."

"T-That's the problem... I still don't have any money. Isn't there some way around this?"

"Hmmm, well... there is one way to smooth things over."

"There is!? Please tell me!"

"Are you sure? It might affect your dignity, though."

"I don't care! Dignity doesn't put food on the table!"

Sachiusu was so desperate that I decided to tell him. I explained what to say if Mr. Yamashika brought up the issue of payment. And then, when it came time to actually pay the fee, I told him exactly what to say and do.

"W-What!? Do I really have to say that?"

"I understand how you feel. But knowing the teacher's personality, this will definitely work. He's sometimes sensitive about this kind of thing."

"...I understand. I guess I have no choice."

Sounding a bit sad, Sachiusu made up his mind.

Just as our secret conversation ended, the teacher returned from the restroom.

"What, you're on the phone? It's not a personal call, is it?"

"Oh, teacher. No, it's an urgent call from Sachiusu. You should talk to him."

"Sachiusu? Don't tell me he's gotten himself into some kind of mess again... Hello?"

The teacher reluctantly took the receiver from me, a displeased look on his face.

"Oh! Mr. Yamashika!"

Sachiusu's excited voice leaked from the receiver.

He then told Mr. Yamashika the same story he had just told me.

"I see... so that's what's going on. But honestly, it's a pain to go to the courthouse now, and I'm definitely not doing this for free—"

"I know! I can give you a reward that you'll love, senior!"

Still holding the receiver, the teacher grinned. What a sneaky lawyer.

"Oh? As long as you understand that, I'll go."

And so, I managed to secure another opportunity to witness Mr. Yamashika's skills.

◆

The small claims court.

It was a simple place, completely unsuited to the rigid connotation that the words "courtroom" usually convey.

It wasn't a large room like the ones you often see used for criminal trials, but rather a fairly cramped space. Well, it's not like you need to fit dozens of people in here, so I guess this is enough.

The most noticeable feature was the round table in the center. Yes, in small claims cases, the judge, the plaintiff, and the defendant all sit together around this round table to discuss the matter.

By the way, there's actually a reason—or rather, a joke—about why the table is round. It goes like this:

"Hey George, do you know why the tables in small claims court are round?"

"HAHAHAHA! Of course! It's so everyone can come around to an agreement without any sharp disagreements!"

And there's a bonus joke too:

"But Michael, do you know why all the money paid in court is in French currency? Do you?"

"HAHAHAHA! Of course, that must be so they can be frank with each other to settle the dispute!"

Alright, here's one more for good measure:

"Hey George, then why are the tables in regular courtrooms square?"

"Think about it, Michael! In a criminal trial, people are always ready to square off!"

There's no need for me to add this, but the French Franc has already been phased out. It's all euros now.

...Anyway.

There was a gallery in the courtroom, but it only had around ten chairs. And all of them were occupied by people wearing glasses and suits, clearly experts of some kind. They were probably witnesses JST had brought. No wonder Sachiusu was so scared when he saw them.

"I feel so much better now that you're here, senior," Sachiusu said, visibly relieved. "I had no idea what to do when they brought out all those experts."

"Well, just relax. As long as I'm being paid, I'll get it done."

Just then, the courtroom door opened, and a man dressed in a judge's robe entered.

"...Oh no. That's Judge Okuda."

The teacher muttered under his breath. My curiosity got the better of me, and I asked,

"Is he famous?"

"Yeah. He’s known for being really lazy. They say that when he was handling civil cases that dragged on for years, he would mutter ‘Ugh, what a pain’ every chance he got. But on the other hand, he’s also credited with helping develop the small claims system."

"Well, that’s... interesting. At least I get that he’s an important person."

"They say he used to always say ‘Ugh, what a pain,’ but eventually even that became too much pain for him. Now it’s just shortened to ‘Ugh, pain.’ In legal circles, they’ve nicknamed him ‘Martyr Okuda.’"

"...What kind of name is that? It sounds like he’d never be able to handle a religious dispute."

At that moment, the clerk called out.

"Everyone, please rise. Bow."

This part was just like in a regular courtroom. Once the judge sat down, we also took our seats.

"Hello, I’m Judge Shigenobu Okuda. So, it looks like everyone’s here?"

The judge-like figure began, though I’m not sure what he meant by “so.”

"Alright, we’ll begin. Looks like the gallery’s pretty full, and both the plaintiff and defendant are present. But I can’t tell who’s who, so could you introduce yourselves? You there, are you the plaintiff?"

He pointed at Sachiusu and asked. Trembling slightly, Sachiusu nodded nervously.

“Oh, uh, yes, that’s right. And this guy... I mean, this man is my lawyer, Attorney Yamashika.”

“Oh, Attorney Yamashika. So you’re the one.”

Judge Okuda nodded approvingly, as if satisfied. Teacher also gave a slight nod of acknowledgement, saying, “How do you do.”

“And you, over there, are the defendant?”

The person in a suit sitting on the other side of the round table, presumably the defendant, bowed his head.

“Yes. My name is Karefumi Tokado, and I serve as JST’s legal counsel. Today, I am here as the representative for the defendant.”

“Well, thanks for your hard work. Still, I have to say, it’s unusual that both sides have lawyers, especially in a small claims case. Makes things easier for me, though. Anyway, no need to read the complaint, right? It’s a pain, and I’m sure everyone here already knows the details.”

I felt like that might be a bit improper procedurally, but to my surprise, neither the plaintiff nor the defendant objected, so the trial proceeded as if everything was perfectly fine. Wow, small claims court is something else. Well, I suppose this case is a bit out of the ordinary.

“So, regarding today’s trial, I’ve reviewed the evidence presented by the plaintiff. There seems to be some reasonable grounds to believe that the plaintiff got food poisoning from the meal he ate at JST. However, only the plaintiff seems to have suffered from food poisoning, and we can’t say with 100% certainty that JST is liable. If we were to determine responsibility definitively, we’d have to move this to a regular civil trial, not a small claims case. But that would be a pain, wouldn’t it? I mean, this case is already a pain as it is. So, I’d like to ask both sides: how about settling? 2000 dollars... well, how about this: 700 dollars to cover the plaintiff’s lost wages for a week, plus another 300 for compensation and medical expenses. One thousand total. How does that sound? Ah, and when I said 'medical expenses' just now... I didn't mean to make a pun on, you know, all this being very expensive for everyone, okay? Okay?"

...An indescribable atmosphere filled the courtroom. I’d heard that small claims court judges tend to be more personable than expected, but isn’t this going a bit too far?

Unable to contain myself, I whispered into Attorney Yamashika’s ear.

“Isn’t this guy being way too casual?”

The teacher immediately responded in a whisper.

“You idiot. That judge is trying to lighten the courtroom mood. You should appreciate that.”

...Is that for real?

Come to think of it, I’d heard he played a role in creating the small claims system, so maybe this is just how he operates. He did make it to the rank of judge, after all.

Just then, the defendant’s attorney, Tokado, raised his hand and spoke.

“Your Honor. As the defendant, we absolutely cannot agree to that settlement proposal. The reason being, there is no evidence to support the plaintiff’s claim that he got food poisoning from the meal he ate at JST.”

“Oh really? Then can you prove that?”

“Yes. We’ve brought in about ten experts to testify. I believe their statements will clarify everything for you.”

“Ten experts? That’s overkill. This is a small claims case, you know. You’re putting in quite the effort.”

“Well, of course. This is a matter that concerns JST’s reputation.”

“I see. Well, then, call one of them up.”

“Yes, let’s start with the gentleman sitting at the far left.”

Attorney Tokado turned his gaze toward one of the individuals sitting in the gallery at the back of the courtroom. It was a slightly lanky middle-aged man.

“Alright, you there,” the judge called out. “Actually, you don’t need to come up here. Just stand where you are. Could you start by telling us your name and profession?”

“Certainly. My name is Shitao Kensawa. I used to work as a food safety inspector at a government quarantine office, but after retiring, I now run a private company specializing in food safety management. At JST’s request, I conducted inspections of their kitchen facilities.”

“I see. Plaintiff, do you have any objections to his testimony?”

“No objections.”

Attorney Yamashika immediately replied.

But I couldn’t help but question the teacher.

“Are you sure it’s okay to let him testify? This is a small claims case, right? If we object, we could prevent him from testifying, couldn’t we?”

Small claims cases are generally concluded in a single day. Therefore, the evidence presented must be something that can be examined in a single day. If an expert testifies about their inspection of the kitchen, we as the plaintiff would also have the right to call in our own expert to refute their testimony. But that wouldn’t be possible in just one day. So, if we objected, the testimony probably wouldn’t be allowed.

“Just shut up and listen.”

Strangely enough, that was all the teacher said. Well, if the teacher, who clearly wasn't expecting to lose, said so, he must have a plan.

"Alright, defendant's side, you may proceed with your examination."

"Understood."

As soon as the judge gave permission, Attorney Tokado stood up.

"Mr. Kensawa, you were asked by JST to inspect the kitchen of the restaurant where the plaintiff claims to have contracted food poisoning, correct?"

"Yes, I did."

"Please testify about the results of that inspection."

"Of course. As a professional, I can say that during the inspection of the restaurant in question, I did not find any pathogens that could cause food poisoning, such as Vibrio parahaemolyticus. This is the inspection report."

Attorney Tokado took a bundle of documents and turned to the judge.

"That's all, Your Honor. As you've just heard, based on the expert's inspection, no pathogens were found at JST. The details are in this report, if you'd like to review it—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get what you're trying to say, defendant. Alright, plaintiff, do you have anything you'd like to say about that testimony?"

"I'd like to do a quick cross-examination, if I may."

The teacher said this nonchalantly.

"Sure, go ahead and do a quick one."

The teacher then turned to Mr. Kensawa.

"Now, Mr. Kensawa, I'd like to ask you something. You mentioned earlier that you run a private inspection company, correct? So, you're the president of that company?"

"Well, yes, I am. Though, it's a small operation with only three employees, including myself, so I personally handle most of the inspections."

"I see. Well, I have a question for you. Can you say with absolute certainty that your inspection results were completely accurate?"

“Yes, of course.”

“I see. Now, let me ask you this. Since this is a small claims case, we won’t be able to present any counter-evidence beyond this cross-examination. However, if we were to withdraw this case and proceed with a full civil trial, we as the plaintiff would be able to bring our own expert to conduct an inspection. So, hypothetically, if we were to call in another expert who inspected the restaurant and found Vibrio parahaemolyticus, thereby proving that your inspection was flawed, would you take responsibility for that and shut down your company?”

Mr. Kensawa visibly flinched. Well, of course. Anybody would react like that if they were asked such a question.

“Uh. No, well, I don’t think I could go that far...”

You should never utter such half-hearted denials in front of Attorney Yamashika... He’ll tear you apart, piece by piece.

“Oh? And why is that? Didn’t you just say that your inspection results were completely accurate? If you’re that confident, there shouldn’t be any problem putting your company’s reputation on the line, right?”

“Well, that’s a different matter. Why should I have to risk my company’s future over this?”

“If you are confident in your inspection results, I don’t see why it would be an issue. Or are you saying you’re not that confident?”

“No, no, that’s not the case at all. I am confident in the results.”

“Oh, is that so? By the way, counselor, I’d like to remind you of something I just said. I asked, ‘What if we bring in another expert to prove your inspection was incorrect?’ And at that time, you immediately replied, ‘Well, I don’t think I could go that far.’ Do you remember?”

“...Yes, I think I said something like that.”

“Isn’t that strange?”

“...What’s strange about it?”

“If you were really confident in your inspection results, you wouldn’t have said that. You should have replied, ‘No, the expert you bring in must be wrong.’ But you didn’t say that. In other words, didn’t you already know that if another expert conducted an inspection, it would immediately prove that your results were wrong?”

“No, no! That’s not true! It was just a figure of speech, or, yes, that’s it—it’s just that I was hesitant to gamble the future of my company, not that there’s any error in the inspection results!”

“So, you’re saying there’s absolutely no error? In that case, there shouldn’t be any issue with putting your company’s future on the line, right?”

“Your Honor!” Attorney Tokado couldn’t hold back and raised his voice. “I object to this line of questioning! The plaintiff is clearly trying to shift the argument!”

“No, Your Honor, it’s quite clear what we, the plaintiff, are aiming for. Since this is a small claims case, we cannot deal with evidence that takes up too much time. That’s why we need to confirm how confident this witness is in his own testimony. And this witness has said that there’s no error in his inspection results. Yet, at the same time, he’s also said that he’s not confident enough to stake his company’s future on those results.”

“That’s precisely what I mean when I say they’re twisting the argument!” Attorney Tokado retorted. “Even if one has confidence in their results, everyone makes mistakes! There’s no way anyone could risk their entire company on that!”

At that moment, Attorney Yamashika smiled devilishly.

“Your Honor, did you hear that? The defense has just admitted that everyone, including them, makes mistakes. In other words, the reliability of the inspection they conducted is only that trustworthy.”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I meant—”

Attorney Tokado was visibly shaken.

“Attorney Yamashika, I think that’s enough. We’ve understood your point.”

Judge Okuda offered a lifeline.

“I’m glad you understand,” Teacher bowed slightly. “Now, Your Honor, given the current circumstances, there’s something we, the plaintiff, absolutely must ask the defendant.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“Think about it, Your Honor. Isn’t this situation undeniably strange? This is a mere small claims case for 2000 dollars, right? And the plaintiff is just an ordinary company employee. Yet, JST, the defendant, has brought in a lawyer and no fewer than ten experts, as if they’re taking this far too seriously. We can’t help but suspect that they have some other motive.”

“W-Wait just a moment!” Attorney Tokado interrupted. “There’s no reason for us to be accused of such nonsense! We are simply showing a firm stance as a company against a claim that’s practically a false accusation!”

But Attorney Yamashika didn’t back down.

“I find it hard to believe you’d get this worked up over just that. Perhaps the real reason is something like this: JST has received other complaints of food poisoning besides from my client, hasn’t it? And they’ve set their sights on this trial. Even though it’s a small claims case, a trial is still a trial. If they can win a ruling that there was no food poisoning, they can use it as a precedent to silence the other complainants. After all, once a ruling is made, other judges tend to follow it.”

“Y-Your Honor! You don’t need to listen to these absurd claims from the plaintiff! Instead, we still have nine more experts ready to testify that JST bears no responsibility for this incident! Please hear their testimony!”

But Attorney Yamashika wasn’t fazed. In fact, he shrugged in a way that seemed almost mocking.

“Your Honor, if possible, I’d like to call just one witness as the plaintiff. With that, I’ll prove that none of the ten experts the defense has brought will be of any help to this trial.”

“Oh? Well, that would make things easier. But who do you plan to call?”

“To be honest, anyone will do. Let’s go with the person sitting to the right of Mr. Kensawa... yes, you. Please stand up. You were also hired by JST to conduct an inspection of some sort, right?”

“Well, yes, that’s correct. I’m a professor of immunology at a university—”

“Oh, no need to mention your job or name. Just answer my question. How much money did JST pay you for this assignment?”

“Uh—”

“I-I object! There’s no need for him to answer such a question!”

Attorney Tokado shouted.

But it seemed that this was exactly the response Attorney Yamashika had been aiming for, as he smiled slyly.

“I see. Well, it’s not surprising that he wouldn’t want to say. After all, if it turns out he was paid more than the 2000 dollars we’re claiming, we’d have to question whether JST’s so-called

defense of their honor is actually tinted by financial motives. But if the witness refuses to testify, then we'll just have to make our own assumptions. I'm guessing you were only paid about 2 dollars for the inspection, right? If not, why don't you show us the receipt?"

"...I can't say anything."

The unknown witness replied.

"Very well, then. You can't deny it. So, in other words, the credibility of your inspection is worth less than 2 dollars, isn't it?"

Before the witness could stammer out a response, Attorney Yamashika turned to Judge Okuda.

"You see, Your Honor? Calling more experts like this one would be a waste of time. This is being a pain, so we'd like to propose a new settlement offer. If the defendant pays 2000 dollars, we'll withdraw the case and promise not to make this matter public. That way, JST's reputation, which they seem so eager to protect that they've gone to the trouble of hiring numerous experts, will remain intact. In fact, based on what they've said, it seems like they care more about their reputation than the money. So, how about it? Can we wrap things up neatly?"

The judge nodded thoughtfully.

"Hmm, I have to say, the plaintiff's argument does make sense. This whole thing is a pain, so why not just settle? Let's see... Attorney Tokado, was it? As the judge, I strongly recommend the plaintiff's settlement offer. What do you think? Or would you prefer to take this to a civil court? But if that happens, this whole affair might become public."

He spoke in a childish tone, but his words were practically a threat. A settlement strongly recommended by the judge. In other words, this was the final warning that things wouldn't go the defendant's way from here on out.

It seemed Attorney Tokado understood the significance of this, as he let out a deep sigh and slumped slightly.

"I understand. We agree to the settlement."

At that moment—

Sachiusu finally managed to escape from a bit of his misfortune.

◆

Epilogue.

Three days later, everything had gone smoothly, and Sachiusu came to the office to say thanks.

“Oh man, thank you so much, senior. Thanks to you, I managed to avoid having to use a loan shark.”

“Nah, I did it for the reward. But you know what’s coming, right? Since you got 2000 dollars, I expect you to give me that special reward, okay?”

And so, Sachiusu decided to follow the advice I’d given him.

“Yeah, I understand. Senior, you’re staying overnight at this office, right? So, in that case, we could... even now...”

At that moment, Sachiusu’s face turned slightly red with embarrassment. I guess saying something like that was more than just embarrassing.

“...Huh? What the hell are you talking about? Staying overnight? Right now? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, come on, senior, you know exactly what I’m talking about. When I said a ‘special reward,’ there’s only one thing it could mean. You see, back when I had that cotton swab go in at the hospital, I sort of... well, I think I woke up to something. You’ve been worrying about not having a girlfriend, right? So, if you want, I could be your backup choi—”

“Like hell I want that, you idiot!!”

Sachiusu was immediately kicked out and banned from the office.

And that’s the punchline for this story.

(My First Trial: The One-Day Trial Edition -- End)

※ This story is a work of fiction. For the sake of dramatization, some procedures and depictions differ from actual small claims proceedings. In the rare event that you find yourself in a situation where you need to file a small claims lawsuit, please do not rely on such stories and make sure to consult with a lawyer, judicial scrivener, or other legal professional.

Also, the company names mentioned in this story, such as JST, are entirely fictional.

続・詐欺師の
生まれた日

The Day a Swindler Was Born: Continued

"I see, so that's what happened. And that's how you, Mr. Yamashika, became a criminal law specialist…?"

"Yeah, something like that."

I said it with a casual air, as if it were the final blow, while ruffling my hair.

The effect was perfect. She seemed deeply impressed, her mouth hanging open in awe.

This is about what I expected. Even if she's a lawyer-in-training, fooling a naive kid in her early twenties is child's play for me. At this rate, I can probably make her run errands for me all week without a single complaint.

Not that it matters, but this kid trusts people's words way too easily. People like her need to be thoroughly deceived and stripped of everything at least once, or they'll end up getting seriously hurt somewhere down the line. Well, whatever happens to her is none of my concern.

The only thing that bothers me is that, technically speaking, this kid is kind of like my apprentice. If my apprentice gets conned too easily, people might start looking at me funny too. That would be a problem. Maybe, as her mentor, it's my duty to trick her once, just to toughen her up against scams. Then again, it's not like I need to do it right away. It's a hassle anyway.

Still—what's with this feeling? I suppose it's because I ended up talking about the old days, but now I'm feeling oddly sentimental. To be honest, I don't even really know what "sentimental" means, but I just can't help but reminisce about the past.

Yes, the story I told her was definitely one of the reasons that led me to lose faith in civil law.

But that wasn't the only reason. It was just one of many.

There's something else.

The true event that made me give up on civil law.

Yes, it happened on a day much like today—cloudy and overcast...

...Wait, was it sunny? Well, the weather doesn't really matter.

詐欺師の生まれた日
～真相編～

The Day a Swindler Was Born: The Real Story

"Cut the crap, you old bastard!"

That day, as soon as I stormed into the Gotokuji Law Office, I let out another angry shout, something I had done so many times already I'd lost count.

Then, that bastard lawyer, Yudai Gotokuji—who I've shortened to "Old Bastard Lawyer"—glanced at me with a look like he was seeing a persistent newspaper salesman, and without even lowering the paper he was reading, he said,

"Again with this? Honestly, young people today have no patience."

"Shut up! You've got some nerve talking about patience when you've got me, a lawyer, handing out flyers! On top of that, I got stopped by the cops three times while doing it in front of the station today! Dammit, what about me looks like I'm some kind of dangerous person!?"

"What, do you really not see it?"

"Shut the hell up! Anyway, I'm a fully qualified lawyer! I've had enough of this crap job! You should change your name from Gotokuji to Gotsukuji, not 'grand virtue temple' but 'stubbornness temple'!"

"Ugh, all this barking and whining. You don't understand a thing. A small, privately run law office lives or dies by its advertising. It's because of this kind of grassroots work that we get clients and keep the business running."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Go die in a ditch. Anyway, I've had enough of hearing that excuse! I'm telling you to let me do some proper lawyer work!"

"So, that's what it's all about in the end, huh?"

At last, the old bastard raised his face from the newspaper.

This old man was some kind of newspaper maniac. On days when there wasn't much work, he would spend the entire day reading newspapers. Not only that, his newspaper choices were ridiculous. I don't know what kind of subscription plan he had, but he received a different one every day. Mondays it's USA Today, Tuesdays The New York Times, then The Wall Street Journal, then The Financial Times, and for some reason, on Fridays, he gets The Christian Science Monitor. I can't even imagine what he reads on the weekends.

"So, what you're saying is," Gotokuji continued, "as long as you get to do something that feels like lawyer work, you won't have any complaints, right?"

"…Of course! I'm still stuck doing cleaning, handing out flyers, and that stupid French fries case!"

"Even that case was a legitimate job, but you're too picky for your own good… Well, fine. I guess there's no explaining it to a rookie. Then, I'll teach you firsthand about the effectiveness of handing out flyers."

With that, Gotokuji pulled out a notepad from the desk and flipped through it.

"Here we go. Hey, Yamashit."

"I told you, my name is Yamashika, you senile idiot."

But Gotokuji didn't seem to care and continued.

"While you were out handing out flyers, we got a consultation request over the phone. The person has a legal issue, but apparently, they're broke and are looking for someone who can take their case for cheap. So, I suggested that if they don't mind a complete rookie lawyer, they could get a lower rate. They said they're desperate and that would be fine."

"…Alright, I don't like being called a rookie, but I get what you're saying. No need to drag this out, just let me handle it."

"Alright, you're up for it. Fine, do as you like. But before you take what will be your second official case, there's one thing I need to tell you."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Listen up. You're a salaried employee at this office. So, no matter how much you charge the client, all the money goes to the firm. Got it?"

"You don't have to spell it out for me. I know."

That's the fate of a lawyer who doesn't have the capital to open their own firm and has to work as an employee in someone else's office. No matter how much money the firm makes, unless the boss decides to hand out bonuses, none of that money trickles down to you. On the flip side, as a worker, your rights are protected, and since you're salaried, you get a fixed income every month and don't have to worry about being fired suddenly.

"Yamashit, as an employee of this firm, you're obligated to follow the office's policies. Last time, I let you handle things your way, but from now on, whenever you take a case as a representative of this law firm, you must collect at least 70 dollars as an upfront fee and success bonus combined. Especially for this case—it shouldn't take too much effort. Got it?"

I thought there was something ridiculous about using the word “collect,” but since there were no clients around to hear, I figured there was no point in calling him out on it, so I kept quiet.

And at that moment…

I was completely underestimating the work of a lawyer. I thought that as long as I took on the case, with my skills as a young lawyer, I’d quickly win the success fee and make a ton of money in no time.

That’s why I ended up making this kind of response:

"Fine, whatever. I’m not in a position to complain. But let’s make it more interesting. If I don’t hit that 70-dollars mark, you can deduct it from my salary. In return, anything over 70 will be my bonus. How’s that sound?"

"Oh?"

The old man only thought about it for a brief moment.

"Alright, if that motivates you, I don’t mind. But there’s a condition. The rule of Gotokuji Law Office is: 'Always haggle over the money.' Giving you everything over 70 is too lenient. If you don’t make at least one hundred fifty, I’m not giving you anything. Anything over that, and I’ll give it to you as a bonus."

"Tch, you’re one greedy bastard. Fine, I’ll give you your rule back. Let’s set the line at one hundred."

The old man grinned.

"Fine, one hundred it is. Let’s see how much you can rake in."

◆

Humans are creatures of emotion, and creatures of mood. If you’ve been stuck doing menial tasks day after day, and then you’re finally offered a chance to do real legal work, any rookie lawyer would jump at the chance without hesitation. No matter what the case might be.

Besides, even though I’d be handling it, the client came to Gotokuji Law Office, not me personally. If I messed up, the one who’d take the blame would be that old bastard Gotokuji.

Because of that, I accepted the case without even asking for the details, and on top of that, I agreed to a condition where I’d pay out of my own pocket if I didn’t make enough.

That said, the case itself wasn't particularly complicated and was actually quite standard for a lawyer's job.

The only thing I misjudged—was my faith in this country's legal system.

◆

The client came in the next day. As for the old bastard, who said he'd leave everything to me, he holed himself up in the next room, enjoying an afternoon nap. Not that I minded—it made things easier for me.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Attorney Zenko Yamashika. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Oh, yes. I'm Ieko Oya. Nice to meet you."

The client was a quiet woman, probably around fifty years old.

Of course, I would've preferred a younger, more attractive client, but I wasn't about to complain. With my best customer service smile, I led her to the sofa in the reception area.

"Please, have a seat."

"Thank you."

"So... what brings you here today?"

"Huh?"

Suddenly, Ieko Oya had a puzzled look on her face.

"Um, didn't I explain it over the phone the other day?"

For a moment, a chill ran down my spine.

That damn Old Bastard Lawyer didn't tell me anything! Was he keeping quiet to mess with me, or is he finally going senile? Either way, both possibilities make sense, which makes it all the more irritating.

But here, saying something like, "There seems to have been some misunderstanding, could you explain it again?" would be embarrassing.

I quickly made up my mind. I'd bluff my way through.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. Of course, I've heard the general gist of it, but you know, just hearing a little bit over the phone can lead to misunderstandings. So, as a policy of this office, we always make sure to ask for the full details again when we meet in person."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense. Sorry about that. You guys are really thorough, aren't you?"

It seemed my smooth-talking had worked like a charm. Plus, having the title of "lawyer" really adds credibility to the bluff.

And so, Ieko Oya began to explain her situation slowly.

"Actually, I lost my father about half a year ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Oh, please don't worry. He lived to a very ripe old age. But when he passed, he left me an apartment building. So now, I'm living as the landlord and manager of that building."

"Ah, I see. So, you're also an 'oya' as in 'landlord', huh?"

"…I'm sorry, but isn't that a bit too corny?"

My attempt to lighten the mood with a joke was met with a fierce counterattack. In moments like this, having the title of "lawyer" only makes things feel even more awkward.

"S-So, what seems to be the issue?"

"Well… there's a young man living in one of the apartments, and ever since I became the landlord, he's been consistently behind on his rent. No matter how many times I urge him to pay, he keeps repeating that he doesn't have the money… And on top of that, he's a big guy with a loud voice, so, well… it's hard for me to demand payment too forcefully. But I'm really depending on the rent to make ends meet, and I've just recently paid for repairs, so I'm running out of money."

"I see. So, basically, you want me to help you collect the rent from him? Or, if that's not possible, to evict him?"

"…Yes. Well, that's pretty much it."

Oya looked a bit uneasy, perhaps not liking the word "evict."

"I read in a book that even if the other person doesn't have the money, you can seize their assets or force them out through legal means, right?"

"Yes, that’s called 'forced execution.' If we go that route, we can certainly evict him from the apartment, and we could auction off his belongings to recover some of the rent."

"That’s great! Then, I’d like to request that, if possible…"

"Understood. Leave it to me. By the way, what’s the name of this man?"

"Isuwarita Akudoku."

"..."

Wow, it sounds like 'overstaying wickedly', what a fitting name for someone refusing to leave… No, forget it. Seriously, someone at the registry office should’ve stopped them from naming him that. It's on par with naming a child 'Little Demon.'

"U-Uh, alright then. Do you happen to have the rental contract you signed with Mr. Akudoku?"

"Yes, I thought it might be necessary, so I brought it with me."

Oya pulled out some documents from her bag and handed them to me.

The paper said something like this:

"Party A (Isuwarita Akudoku) and Party B (Ieko Oya) enter into this rental agreement."

And, within the contract, the clause I’d been looking for was clearly written:

"Party A will pay 540 dollars in rent and 60 dollars in maintenance fees each month."

"If Party A is more than three months behind on rent, Party B can evict him immediately."

With this, the legal basis is solid. No matter how much of a scumbag this Isuwarita Akudoku guy might be, if I, as a lawyer, present this contract, there’s no way he can squirm out of it.

Moreover, six months of unpaid rent at 600 dollars per month adds up to 3600 dollars. If I can collect the full amount, the total will easily cover the retainer, handling fees, and my success fee, making 1000 dollars a sure thing.

"Alright, I understand. Just so you know, this is still a job for us, so before we take on the case, we’ll need to receive an upfront retainer fee…"

But suddenly, Oya’s face clouded over.

"Yes, I understand that… But I’m really tight on money, so… how much would I need to pay?"

The amount owed by Isuwarita Akudoku is just over 3500 dollars. Given that, I could charge her 350 or 400 dollars based on the standard rate. But this client came to me, a rookie lawyer, specifically because she wanted to keep costs down. If I start by charging too much and she takes her business to another law firm, that would be missing the point.

"Yes, I understand. How about this? In a case like this, the standard retainer fee is around 400 dollars. But for now, I'll accept 120 dollars instead. In return, if we manage to recover six months of rent, I'll charge the standard lawyer's fee at that point. How does that sound?"

Oya's face relaxed in relief.

"That sounds great. I can manage that. As long as you can get Mr. Akudoku out of the apartment, I'll be satisfied. Can we go with that?"

"Of course. Leave it to me."

Heh, got her. I didn't mention anything about the actual fee.

In other words, she's just signed a blank check. If I manage to recover the full six months of rent, I can easily bump up the handling fees and charge her around 1700 dollars. After all, this woman, Ieko Oya, couldn't even stand up to her delinquent tenant, which is why she came to me for help in the first place. If I push a little harder, she'll definitely pay whatever I ask.

Even if I give 1000 dollars to the old bastard lawyer, the rest will be my bonus. Not bad at all. Sure, I feel a little like a conman rather than a lawyer, but that's just my imagination. This woman knows full well that nothing in life is that easy.

However—what I didn't realize at this point was just how much more troublesome Isuwarita Akudoku would turn out to be.

The next day, I went to Oya's apartment, confronted Akudoku, and explained that I was the lawyer hired by Ieko Oya. I told him that according to the contract, he needed to either pay the rent he owed or vacate the premises immediately.

But Akudoku's response was the same, over and over:

"I'm not saying I won't pay! I told you, I'll pay when I have the money!"

I was honestly dumbfounded.

Even facing a lawyer, he didn't back down, shamelessly insisting that everything would be fine if it worked out for him. There really are people in the world this brazen.

"But you see, Mr. Akudoku, you signed this contract, didn't you? It states that if you're more than three months behind on rent, you have to move out."

"Yeah, sure, that's what it says. But I don't have the money to move, and I've got nowhere else to go. If you want me out, why don't you pay me some moving expenses? I'll leave right away if you do."

That really pissed me off.

My client is so broke that she had to hire a lawyer just to evict this guy and collect the unpaid rent. And now he's asking for moving expenses? There's no way she can afford that, and she has no intention of paying.

"I see. I understand your position. But there's no way we're going to pay you any moving expenses. If you can't pay the rent right now, we'll have to take the appropriate legal action. Are you okay with that?"

"Oh, 'appropriate legal action,' huh? Well, do whatever you want."

Akudoku said this with a smirk on his face.

Hmm. This is not quite what I expected.

I'm not just some timid landlord; I'm a lawyer on the front lines of the justice system. Normally, when a lawyer threatens someone, they should be groveling on the ground, begging for forgiveness.

"…Understood. I've given you a warning, so don't regret this later."

"Thanks for the warning. But you'd better back down before all your effort turns into a big waste of time."

The next place I visited was the local police station. The reason was simple: I wanted to report Akudoku, who was illegally occupying the property without paying rent.

But here, I once again exposed myself as the inexperienced rookie lawyer that I am.

After listening to my story, the police officer on duty said the following:

"I see. Yes, I understand your situation. There are some bad people out there. But lawyer, what exactly do you want us to do?"

This surprised me as well.

"What do you mean, 'what'? It’s obvious, isn’t it? Arrest that scumbag Akudoku for trespassing, fraud, or whatever works."

"That’s impossible."

"…Why?"

"Because that guy hasn’t done anything illegal."

"That’s ridiculous!" I blurted out in shock. "He hasn’t paid rent in six whole months—"

"Yes, we understand that. But he hasn’t said that he’s refusing to pay, right? He’s claimed he intends to pay, hasn’t he? In that case, there’s no role for the police in this. What’s it called? The Tenant Protection Law? That law gives renters a lot of protection… By the way, why am I explaining the law to a lawyer?"

"…Don’t ask me."

"In any case, that’s the situation. If you were scammed or had money stolen, that would be different. But this is just a matter of waiting for payment or not, so the police can’t get involved. Sorry about that."

At that moment, a certain phrase popped into my head.

That phrase was "Civil Matters Non-Intervention." As the name suggests, it means the police do not intervene in private civil disputes.

◆

"…I should’ve realized that before going to the police."

Remembering my own inexperience back then, I muttered to myself in self- deprecation.

If I had studied a little more, I wouldn’t have wasted my time and been looked at with pity by that police officer.

But, to be fair, I couldn’t really help it.

When I passed the written portion of the bar exam, there was one thing that stuck with me.

When I reviewed my answers after the exam, my score was borderline at best. Yet somehow, I passed.

Back then, let’s say my exam number was 1000.

The person with the number just before mine, 999, was a senior from my university—a top student, a genius. But for some reason, he failed the exam.

Based on this, I’m convinced there was only one reason I passed the bar exam. The examiner must have mixed up my answer sheet with someone else’s.

◆

After failing to intimidate Akudoku with my lawyer status and being brushed off by the police, my options were running out.

More importantly, I couldn’t let that bastard Akudoku off the hook. There was no way I’d feel satisfied until I knocked him down a peg. So, I returned to the office, sat on the client sofa, and began preparing some documents.

"What do you think you’re doing?"

The one asking this perfectly reasonable but incredibly annoying question was none other than the old bastard Gotokuji.

"You’re a lawyer. Can’t you tell? I’m preparing documents for a civil lawsuit."

"Oh, a lawsuit, huh? So, you’re planning to sue that squatter from the apartment?"

"Yeah, that’s right. You got a problem with that?"

My voice carried a hint of anger because Gotokuji’s tone was laced with mockery.

"I see. So you couldn’t resolve it through negotiation?"

There was an undercurrent in his words that seemed to mock my incompetence, so I immediately snapped back.

"So what if I couldn’t?! It’s not like I had a choice. That bastard kept dodging the issue and never gave a single sincere answer! But that ends now. Once I drag him to court and get a judgment to seize his belongings, he’ll change his tune!"

"Oh, is that so? Well, do as you like. It'll be a good experience for you. But, Yamashit, I have one more question."

"It's Yamashika, not 'Yamashit,' you old bastard."

"Ah, my mistake. Anyway, Yamashit, if I remember correctly, you didn't receive much of a retainer for this case, did you? So where are you planning to get the money to cover the court costs?"

I wanted to punch him for asking such a smug question.

"…You know damn well, don't you? It's coming out of my own pocket. But as long as I get the money back, I'll be making around 1300 dollars. You've got no right to say anything about it."

"Oh, I see. Of course, I have nothing to say. Do your best."

With that, the old bastard Gotokuji went back to his usual routine of reading the newspaper.

As infuriating as it was, all I could do was grit my teeth and think, "Just you wait," while I continued working on the documents.

And so, the day of the civil lawsuit finally arrived.

"Now, Judge Watanabe will be presiding. Everyone, please rise."

The clerk's disinterested voice echoed through the empty courtroom.

Then, a man who looked very much like a judge walked in, wearing the traditional robes.

"Alright, let's get this 'trial' started, shall we?"

His voice was casual, even mixing in some English. On top of that, he was holding a large book, like a dictionary, in one hand.

…He's Japanese, right? He looks Japanese, and his name is completely normal.

So why is he speaking this exaggerated English, like some foreigner from a comic book?

Maybe it was the confused look on my face, but Judge Watanabe turned to me and said:

"Oh, I'm studying English right now. You see, learning English… uh, hold on a second," he said, flipping through the dictionary like a maniac. "Ah, here it is. Learning English is 'important' for

practicing 'speaking' daily, right? Oh, am I 'hard' to 'understand'? Should I stop and just speak normally?"

At first, I was too dumbfounded to say anything.

But I couldn’t just ignore the judge, nor could I tell him to stop speaking in such a confusing manner.

"…No, not at all. Everyone’s free to do what they want, so it’s totally fine."

"Right? That’s what I thought. It’s the era of 'bilingual' judges now. You know, all the 'people' I’ve presided over have said the same thing."

Of course, they did. No one wants to piss off a judge—that’s probably why, I thought, but I swallowed the words.

"Anyway, let’s get started with the 'trial'. Both the plaintiff and the defendant are 'ready', right? Though it seems the defendant hasn’t shown up."

That’s right.

Today, in this courtroom, aside from the judge and the court officials, there wasn’t a single person in the gallery or at the defendant’s seat. In other words, that scumbag Akudoku had skipped court without any excuse.

But this wasn’t bad news for me. Because when the defendant skips a court hearing without notice, that means—

"To begin with, we haven't received any statement of defense from the defendant. In other words, this means that the defendant has admitted to all the 'claims' made by the plaintiff. So, there’s really no point in going through with the 'trial', is there? Let’s just go ahead and issue a 'judgment'."

—That’s basically what it came down to.

"Yes, please. As mentioned in the complaint, the plaintiff has been unable to collect any rent from the defendant, and is in a very distressed situation. I would greatly appreciate it if you could intervene as soon as possible."

"I see. 'Alright', let’s issue the judgment. As per the plaintiff’s request, the defendant is ordered to pay 3600 dollars in unpaid rent for the past six months. Additionally, the defendant is ordered to return the rented property to the plaintiff. If the defendant fails to comply with the judgment, feel 'free' to proceed with forced execution or whatever else is necessary."

"Thank you very much."

The documents I wrote to file this lawsuit, many. The transportation costs, the stamp fees, the miscellaneous expenses, many. The judgment I received, priceless.

Though it felt a bit ridiculous, I had successfully obtained the judgment I sought.

"However, plaintiff, it would be 'great' if the defendant just pays up without any fuss, but… do you 'understand' the process for forced execution if they don't? You'll have to call in a specialized moving company or a locksmith; it's a bit troublesome… well, I mean, it's rather 'troublesome'."

Of course, I had no experience with forced execution at this point. I could understand needing a locksmith. If I had to forcibly enter Akudoku's place to seize his belongings, I'd need to call a locks expert. But why a specialized moving company? Wouldn't a regular moving company suffice? And isn't this something the court handles?

But whatever, if it's about the procedures and rules, I could just ask that old bastard Gotokuji. Besides, I honestly didn't want to talk to this judge any longer.

"…No, but I guess I can ask someone I know, since I'm an associate."

"Is that so? Then ask your senior at the office. Oh, by the way, did you know there's no exact English word for 'senpai'? You can say 'senior' in the sense of a superior, but it's not quite the same. Did you know that?"

"…Huh. That's good to know."

Honestly, I couldn't care less.

"Alright, good. Well, that's that. Thank you for your time today. By the way, do you know what 'forced execution' is in English?"

"…No idea. Don't ask me."

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And so, I obtained the legal backing to evict that bastard Akudoku from the apartment, and also to seize his belongings and auction them off if he didn't pay the rent.

However, it was only a few days later that I realized what a worthless judgment this would turn out to be.

That’s right. Despite the court’s ruling, Akudoku’s attitude didn’t change at all, and he still refused to pay the rent. At this point, his stubbornness was almost admirable.

Thus, I was forced to initiate the legal procedures to enforce the judgment—commonly known as forced execution.

But with my limited experience as a lawyer at the time, although I knew forced execution was an option, I had no idea how to actually go about it.

So, that day, as soon as I returned to the office, I went to ask Gotokuji.

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"Hey, old bastard. I’ve got the court’s approval, but how do I go about doing this forced execution thing?"

For once, Gotokuji actually set down his newspaper right away and got into the conversation.

"Hmm, alright. As your senior, I should teach you at least that much. But are you sure, Yamashit? Forced execution costs quite a bit of money, you know?"

"It’s Yamashika, dammit. Yeah, I know. You need a moving company and a locksmith, right? Once we seize his belongings and auction them off, I’ll get the money back soon enough, won’t I? So how much do I need to prepare?"

Everything went downhill from Gotokuji’s next words.

"Let’s see. Well, around 2500 dollars should cover it."

"Whaaaat!?"

You can imagine why I screamed. Of course, I did.

"Hold on a second! I’m trying to recover 3600 dollars in unpaid rent here! How the hell does it cost 2500 dollars to execute forced eviction!? What kind of moving company costs that much!?"

"Have you not studied civil execution law? Listen carefully. The person who carries out forced execution is a court bailiff belonging to the court’s enforcement department. But bailiffs have a lot of other jobs, so even when they perform a forced execution, they’ll only assist you for about two hours. During that time, you need to auction off valuable property and arrange for a moving company to take the defendant’s belongings and store them in a warehouse. Of course, since the defendant might not be home, you’ll need a locksmith too. And the law requires someone to be present to witness the execution. We call them 'witnesses,' and you’ll need to pay them a daily fee."

"Ugh… I guess that much makes sense, but still, a moving fee for a single person's belongings shouldn't cost more than 600 dollars, right? And even if you add a storage unit and a locksmith, it shouldn't come to more than 300 dollars. How does it end up being 2500 dollars? Are the witnesses that expensive?"

"No, witnesses are relatively cheap. The problem is everything else. Think about it, Yamashit. If you hire a regular moving company, how long do you think it'll take them to pack everything and move it out? Can they finish in just two hours?"

"Oh…"

Only then did I realize what he was getting at.

"Now do you understand? That's why you need a specialized moving company that's skilled in handling evictions. They'll send a whole team of strong guys to get the job done. Also, since they'll be handling someone else's property, even with judicial approval, you need to hire a reputable, trustworthy company. That's why the cost skyrockets. Here, one of the major companies in our industry is this one."

As he said this, Gotokuji pulled out a flyer.

I snatched it from his hand and read it.

"We'll handle it with care, court-approved! Shiroari Mark's Moving Service!"

…A name that practically screams 'we're asking for trouble.'

"No impossible forced evictions for us! Celebrating our 300th anniversary! Get one former wrestler for free!"

…There were so many things I wanted to point out, but I decided to let it go.

On the other hand, when I saw the listed costs, I couldn't help but glare at the old bastard in frustration.

"…Hey. What the hell is this '100 dollars per hour' nonsense?"

"That's a reasonable rate, don't you think?"

"…Huh? In what world is that reasonable?"

"Let me tell you, it used to be twice that not so long ago. But these guys are specialists, able to finish all moving tasks in just one or two hours. So, of course, it costs more. And it's not just the

moving company that’s expensive. Like I said before, even if you call a court bailiff and a moving company, if the defendant isn’t home and the door’s locked, you’re out of luck. That’s why you, as the plaintiff, need to have a locksmith ready. However, since there’s a risk of being charged with trespassing if something goes wrong, you have to hire a locksmith who’s been approved by the court. For example, there’s this one."

Saying this, Gotokuji pulled out another flyer.

"Locksmith Specialist 'Oyster'! Court-approved, all locks opened in one go!"

"…So what’s with this '300 dollars per lock' price!?"

"Because they’re professionals. And it’s not just that—you also have to hire a specialized storage facility to keep the seized belongings, which can cost tens of dollars a day. It might end up costing more than 2500 dollars. By the way, Yamashit, let me tell you something interesting. It’s a truth of the world."

There was a teasing tone in Gotokuji’s voice. Honestly, I didn’t want to listen to anything more from this guy, but given the situation, I couldn’t just ignore him.

"What are you talking about, truth? Don’t get all dramatic. What do you mean?"

"What I mean is this: those bailiffs, specialized moving companies, and locksmiths—they’re mostly former court employees."

"…Former court employees? What do you mean by that?"

"Don’t you understand? This is why you’re an idiot. Let me put it this way—it’s a cushy post-retirement job for court officials."

"Whaaaaat!?"

I wanted to shout that such a ridiculous thing couldn’t possibly be true—but the more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

Certified, reputable professionals approved by the court. Why are they considered trustworthy? Because former court employees are working there. And if any other companies tried to enter the industry, they’d be shut out on the grounds of lacking credibility, unless they accepted retired court officials. No wonder the prices were sky-high. In an industry with no competition, prices are bound to soar.

"…You bastard. You knew, didn’t you? That even if you win a civil case and go for forced execution, it would cost this much money. And you kept quiet about it?"

"You didn’t ask, so I didn’t tell you. More importantly, don’t forget, Yamashit—you owe this office over 1000 dollars."

"What kind of scam is this!?"

"Shut up. All of this started because you, an inexperienced fool, wanted to show off and took on the case. Besides, Yamashit, let me ask you this. Any lawyer, even a rookie, knows that forced execution costs a lot of money. What exactly did you learn during your legal training?"

"You have some nerve! When I was doing my training at this office, all you made me do was cleaning and odd jobs! Who do you think was responsible for that!?"

"Now, now. Blaming others for your own shortcomings is a bad habit of yours. Learning comes from your own desire to improve. As long as you have the will to learn, you’ll naturally pick up what you need to know, no matter the situation. Sure, I only had you do odd jobs, but this is a legitimate law office. If you had just paid attention, you could’ve overheard plenty of my conversations as a lawyer."

"S-Shut up! You talk too much, you old bastard…!"

"If people say that about you as a lawyer, you should take it as a compliment. But more importantly, what are you going to do, idiot? You took on this case, promising to pay the office over 1000 dollars. Are you going to cough up another 2500 for the forced execution and keep going? Let me tell you, based on my experience, court auctions are a terrible process. There are hardly any bidders. Even if you seize the belongings of a man living alone, you’d be lucky to get 600 dollars."

"Ugh…"

At that moment, I was literally at a loss for words.

I had thought that once I went through with the forced execution, I’d definitely be able to collect the 3600 dollars in unpaid rent, and on top of that, kick that bastard Akudoku out.

But I never expected it would require thousands of dollars. I couldn’t just fork out that kind of money myself, and I couldn’t ask Oya to pay it at this point either. And even if I managed to auction off Akudoku’s belongings, there was no guarantee I’d recover over 3500 dollars. If Akudoku had that kind of money, he would’ve just paid the rent in the first place.

On top of that, I had made the painful promise to pay the office over 1000 dollars. Even if I managed to recover around 3500 dollars from the auction, after deducting 2500 dollars in costs, there wouldn’t be much left as a success fee. Worse yet, if Oya complained to the bar about how the agreement wasn’t honored and she didn’t get her money back, I could end up facing some sort of penalty.

I realized that my situation was even more hopeless than I'd thought, and I was stunned.

"…I don't get it, old man. Isn't the court supposed to be a powerful ally for the weak? So how does it make sense that the costs are so high and there's no guarantee of recovering anything?"

"That's how the judicial system in this country works. Anyone who's spent a little time in this profession knows it's all an illusion. So, Yamashit, are you going to give up? If this has taught you to be a little more humble, I might be willing to lend you a hand."

That smug bastard had the nerve to say something like that.

Honestly, at that moment, I had no other viable options. But I wasn't about to admit defeat to this old man, so I reluctantly responded.

"…What kind of hand?"

"So, you're giving up?"

"I didn't say that. I'm asking what kind of help you're offering."

Gotokuji gave me a sly grin, as if he could see right through me.

"Hmm, very well. I suppose a stubborn fool like you wouldn't want to admit defeat. But I'm sure you've learned your lesson by now, so I'll tell you. After all, if I leave this entirely in your hands, it might tarnish the reputation of our office."

I wanted to punch him.

Whether he sensed my anger or not, the old bastard continued leisurely.

"Thanks to a certain law that was passed recently, this method can no longer be used. But back in the day, there was a simple way to handle cases like this."

"A simple way…? What are you talking about? What method other than going to court could there be?"

"Don't you get it? I'm talking about the yakuza."

"What…?"

I was shocked by the unexpected word that came out of his mouth, but I quickly understood.

I see. That's what he meant.

When you’re dealing with someone like Akudoku, a guy who won’t respond to legal methods, you need to resort to other measures.

In other words, you hire the yakuza to collect the debt.

The 'certain law' the old man mentioned wasn’t just "certain"—he meant the Anti-Organized Crime Law.

"I get it. But, old man, if you hire the yakuza to collect a debt, won’t they skim off 80% of the profits? And isn’t it illegal for them to engage in that kind of activity under the Anti-Organized Crime Law?"

"That’s correct. That’s why you can’t just hire an ordinary yakuza. But every lawyer has similar experiences, and recently, a specialized company has emerged to handle this kind of thing."

With those infuriating words, the old bastard handed me a flyer.

In big, bold letters, it read:

"What the hell is this? 'Actors Dispatch Service, Debt Collection Paradise'…?"

Out of all the flyers I’d seen today, this one was by far the craziest.

"Don’t let the name fool you. They employ former pro wrestlers and former gangsters—big, intimidating guys with scary faces. And the company takes full responsibility for teaching them all the necessary legal knowledge."

The way the old bastard explained it, the company worked like this:

First, you temporarily transfer the debt—in this case, the 3600 dollars in unpaid rent for six months and the right to rent the apartment where Akudoku was living—to the company. Then, a group of thuggish-looking guys, who practically scream 'yakuza,' would show up at Akudoku’s door. They'd look like they’re saying, 'We’re the yakuza who bought your debt. From now on, we’ll be handling this, so you better watch out.' However, these guys were fully educated in the law and would never do anything illegal.

But from Akudoku’s perspective, having a bunch of guys who look like yakuza show up at his place would be terrifying. If it were someone like Oya, a timid woman, he might have stood his ground, but dealing with people who look like yakuza is a whole different story.

Even if Akudoku tried to run to the police, the people he would be dealing with weren't yakuza but legitimate employees, and since they wouldn't do anything illegal, the police wouldn't help him. Besides, Akudoku was in the wrong for not paying six months of rent in the first place. He wouldn't be able to make any bold moves.

And so, the day after I hired that company, the same Akudoku who had been complaining about having no money easily handed over 3600 dollars, and a thug-like man showed up at Gotokuji's law office.

"…So, the debt collection has been completed. Mr. Akudoku has also said he'll be moving out by the end of the day."

Indeed, the guy looked like a yakuza to anyone who saw him. Huge build. A voice that rumbled deep. Piercing eyes. And his little finger was clearly a prosthetic.

Although his tone was polite, anyone visited by a man like that would feel inclined to cough up the money right away.

"Good job. I appreciate your efforts."

Gotokuji, who had come out to deal with the man, offered a few words of thanks.

"Now, we'll be taking a fee of about 600 dollars. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Understood. We look forward to doing business with you again."

And with that, the case was closed.

Just like that.

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After that, I managed to scrape 1000 dollars from the remaining 3000 as success fees and necessary expenses, and handed the rest over to Oya.

Oya seemed more pleased about getting rid of Akudoku than about the actual recovered amount, so she didn't complain much. And I, having managed to pay the office the minimum 1000 dollars, didn't suffer any major losses either.

In other words, on the surface, it was a peaceful resolution.

But this case was the reason I came to absolutely hate civil law.

It’s only natural. After all, when it comes to debt collection, a yakuza-like figure can accomplish the task far more effectively than a lawyer. Perhaps there are better methods I could’ve learned as a lawyer, but this case was so shocking that I lost the will to learn any more about it.

However, there was one thing I did learn.

It came from the pompous words Gotokuji said after the case:

"Listen, Yamashit, remember this: I may boast, but I never lie. That’s something I’ve realized is essential to surviving as a lawyer. And one more thing, keep this in mind: as long as a lie isn’t proven to be a lie, it’s just a boast."

(The Day a Swindler Was Born: The Real Story -- End)

Afterword

First of all, I would like to say this.

The name of Ms. S, who has been mentioned several times in the afterwords of the Tactical series…

Ms. S, my first editor, who taught me the ins and outs of the industry and is the hidden ruler—no, the benefactor—who helped build the Tactical series from scratch…

This spring, she safely gave birth to a baby girl.

So, I take this opportunity to offer my heartfelt congratulations. I imagine the child must be just as cute as she is. Raising a child must be hard work, but hang in there.

But.

Why is it that when I ask, "Can I name the baby?" she coldly responds, "No, thank you"? I'm confident I could come up with a unique name that no one would ever forget once they heard it!

…Well, enough with the introduction. Now, how did you find "Tactical Judgment SS Volume 4"? Since I've got a bit of extra space on this afterword page, I'd like to write about each story individually this time.

Please note, there may be some spoilers ahead, so if possible, I recommend reading this after you've finished the main story.

My First Trial: The Phantom Menace

Also known as the "Classroom Trial Series."

This short story is the first in the Tactical series where the culprit wasn't revealed by the end. In real trials where the defendant pleads not guilty, the culprit often remains unknown, and things end ambiguously. I thought it might be interesting to try that in a novel, but even as I wrote it, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was kind of lazy. This will probably be the last time I try something like that.

By the way, the subtitle "Phantom Menace" simply means "an invisible threat," and has nothing to do with a certain sci-fi movie, just to be clear.

My First Trial: Online Game Edition

I feel like I've written about this before, but I'm a huge fan of games. Of course, I love online games too. When many people interact in an online game, various problems can arise, and I thought it would be interesting to write a story about that. How did it turn out?

By the way, this might be a completely trivial fact, but before I became a full-time writer, I worked for Company S, where I was involved in the development of a certain online game.

The Day a Swindler Was Born

You could call this the origin story of good ol' Yamashika.

When I read real-life accounts published by lawyers, a common theme is how they're often troubled by all sorts of clients.

So, this is a story that shows how tough customer service work can be.

A Mistake from the Past: Together with Dad

This short story was born from a comment by Ms. S: "It wouldn't be surprising if Yamashika had an illegitimate child, right?"

I wrote it in one go, riding that momentum.

Incidentally, I believe I heard the news of Ms. S's pregnancy right around the time I was planning to write this story. It's quite an interesting coincidence.

My First Trial: The One-Day Trial Edition

A story about the small claims court.

Some of you might remember that I wrote about this in the afterword of "Tactical Volume 9", but at the end of last year, I had food poisoning after eating dinner at a certain major food chain.

I went to the hospital and thought about suing the restaurant and turning it into material for a full-length novel if it turned out to be food poisoning. But, fortunately or unfortunately, no virus was found, so I made it the subject of a short story instead.

Still, even now, I'm certain it was food poisoning. At first, I thought I just had a cold and didn't go to the hospital right away, so by the time I got tested, the bacteria had probably already died. I'm still convinced of that.

By the way.

Earlier this year, my sister got married, and the whole family came down with a case of group food poisoning, leaving us bedridden for three days. That's a true story. Norovirus is no joke.

At that time, I started studying small claims court, thinking I'd sue the venue, but since it was my sister's wedding, I couldn't escalate things, and in the end, nothing came of it. Peace really is best, isn't it?

The Day a Swindler Was Born: Continued

The Day a Swindler Was Born: The Real Story

These are original short stories written for this book.

While researching for the Tactical series, I've often been made painfully aware of one thing:

The reality of trials is pretty grim.

I've never personally been involved in a lawsuit, but you rarely hear people say, "The Japanese court system is the best!" That's why I wanted to use that as material for a story.

Of course, as a work of fiction, I've exaggerated and simplified some things, and the judicial system itself is constantly improving.

So, I don't think readers need to feel as hopeless as good ol' Yamashika does, but as the saying goes, "Truth is stranger than fiction." So, I can't say for sure.

By the way, this might sound like a bold and self-centered statement, but I'm a big supporter of the upcoming lay judge system. I've heard that courts tend to be conservative at best and outdated at worst, so I think it's a good idea to bring in some fresh air.

And just for the record, I'm not thinking, "If I become a lay judge, I can gather all the material I want for my stories!" Not at all.

…Well, that's about it.

Now that I've gotten through everything, as usual, I'd like to make a little announcement about my next work.

I have some news to share.

As I mentioned in the afterword of "Tactical Volume 9", I've been working on a new project for quite some time, and it's finally ready to be announced.

So here it is: the title is "The Tale of the Land of Fire and the Land of Wind".

It's a fantasy story, essentially a tale of a kingdom's army and a rebel army clashing with each other—think of it as removing the "courtroom" from "courtroom tactics" and replacing the words with arrows flying through the air.

Fortunately, *Dragon Magazine* has offered me a spot for a serial, and just around the time this book is released, the first short story will be published in the September issue, which goes on sale at the end of July. Please check it out if you're interested.

In addition to the short story, the manuscript for the full-length novel is already complete, and it should be released in either October or November. The short story series focuses on the rebel army, while the full-length novel centers on the kingdom's army. At least, that's the plan for now.

This is a project I've worked on for a very long time, and recently, both my editor and I have started to feel like we've finally hit our stride with it. (I'd like to think securing the serialization spot is part of that.)

I hope you're looking forward to it.

Well then, I hope we can meet again in the afterword of "The Tale of the Land of Fire and the Land of Wind".

Toru Shiwasu

P.S.

Oh, by the way, I just remembered that I forgot to add a comment about one of the short stories, so I’m going to write it here.

Night of the Little Ones

Well, you’ll probably understand once you read it, but this is a parody of a certain work—wait, sorry, someone’s at the door, so I’ll have to step o–

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。『タクティカル・ジャッジメント』で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に選ばれる。同作にて作家デビュー。本シリーズをメインに執筆する。2007年秋よりファンタジアにて新シリーズ『火の国、風の国物語』を立ち上げるべく現在準備中。

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